

OMEGA

A Satirical Phantasy

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As we stole past the burning hulks of cars, our skin brushed by litter raised high by the cold wind, it was difficult to imagine the safe world and the secure way of life that was all I'd known just a week ago. A day that began with breakfast, on the dawn of a Suburban day much like every other Suburban day. As usual, my preparation for the day ahead was a bowl of cereal, two slices of toast with marmalade and butter, and a cup of instant coffee. The television burred in the background, where it caught the reflection of the early morning sun slanting through the window.

Outside, the Suburbs was stirring. There was the low whirl of the milk float, the revving of cars preparing to leave for work, the slamming of doors and the purposeful tread of commuters along the pavement. Sparrows and blackbirds serenaded each other from the hedges and trees. A postman paced by, oblivious to the stream of commuters as he sifted through post that he would dispense with a dull thud onto doormats already cluttered with free newspapers and unsolicited promotions.

The Suburbs was where I lived. Semi-detached house after semi-detached house arrayed in all directions, harmoniously separated by fences, protected from the street by hedge, lawn and driveway. Every house adorned by television aerials, telephone wires, plumbing, electricity and gas. Every house self-contained and every Suburban occupant in a world bounded by television and the garden fence.

My house was no exception. I was no exception. Except that today I was not a commuter.

Although I was not in the general procession of commuter traffic, I knew that it

would be my destiny. Soon, I would join the daily regiment that headed to the City, briefcase and umbrella in hand, to keep the Suburbs in garden gnomes, Welcome doormats and nostalgic country ornaments.

I left my house with no purpose and no destination, envying those hurrying by with both. I ambled towards the park where the orderly rows of semi-detached houses gave way to orderly rows of trees and hedges along well-paved paths. There were children's swings and slides, and ornamental flowerbeds. There were no clouds in the sky and the shadows had a sharpness that enhanced the plastic clarity of the flowers and trimmed trees.

I sat on one of the regularly spaced benches. The manicured lawn extended ahead towards a hedge that secluded the park from a less peaceful world where double-decker buses and family cars drove past. My mind was on many things, mostly inconsequential. What did I need to buy at the supermarket? Which bills needed paying? Were there really rats under the floorboards?

However, as now, in the desolation of a world turned upside-down, I was also occupied by thoughts of the Truth. At the time, it seemed such a harmless and abstract pursuit.

There'd been a great deal of discussion on television as experts declared how close they were to divining its nature. They might not know for sure what the Truth was, but they had a clearer idea than ever before. Or at least they had a better idea of what it most certainly wasn't.

Although that seemed absurd now in the desolate wastelands, I was tempted to declare that the Truth already existed and was in the Suburbs. If the Truth was evident in a life as well organised and purposeful as possible, blessed with the greatest degree

of civilised comfort, where else but in the Suburbs was there the degree of utilitarian perfection that earned that description? Wasn't the purpose of life the striving towards further perfection of an orderly state? All that was needed was to tidy up a few lawns, eliminate litter and better municipal planning.

However, I was sure there was more to the Truth than that. The Suburbs lacked any objective greater than its own perfection. I looked around the park and beyond, at the tiled roofs of semi-detached houses and private gardens. The Truth must be beyond all this.

But if not in the Suburbs where else could the Truth be found? As I looked now at my lover, illuminated by the flames of burning homes, I wondered, as I did then, whether it was to be found in Love. Generations have believed that the Truth is revealed through Love. The heart ascends above the mundane and predictable. You do only the best for others. And in return others do the best for you.

My eyes followed a woman who walked purposefully by on the business of her day. Behind her, the sun heightened the greenness of the grass. A thrush hammered at the ground, no doubt equally in pursuit of its own business. It took off and flew like an arrow into a tree.

Could the Truth be found in meditative contemplation of the world? Isn't it often said that beauty and reason is in the perfection of nature: the balance of the ecological order and the struggle for the most fit to survive. On a peaceful day in the park, that didn't seem as unlikely as it did in the shadows of the smoke billowing from abandoned buildings, where life was now so brutish and short.

I wondered whether the Truth had a Divine providence, as my eyes were directed heavenwards by the spire of a church above the television aerials. Could God

be the personification of the Truth? A Truth, however, that required Faith. Without Faith (and which Faith?) where then is the Truth? And if God personifies the Truth, what is that Truth?

The ants that filed past my feet then, almost invisible in the cracks of the path's tarmac, were so much less a threat than the swarms of huge insects now filling the skies. It is often said that insects, not humans, are the true owners of the world. I had heard that there were some rather large and frightening insects beyond the Suburbs, something I now knew for sure.

Just one week earlier, the world beyond was totally unknown to me. I was certain I wouldn't like a great deal of it; but if I were to find the Truth, I would have to face many hazards. I had often been told of the horrors of the outside world. However, some of what I had been warned against sounded quite good fun. How can one know the Truth until one has lived life to the full, (which I was sure I couldn't do in the Suburbs)? But then, if the Truth could be found in a life of indulgence and pleasure, why so many warnings against it?

Perhaps it would have been better if I had been content to listen to those older and wiser than I, who, from centuries of history and experience, divined traditions and customs that enshrine the Truth. However, although no historian, I knew of no occasion in the past when the Truth had been found. Perhaps it is the discoveries of the great philosophers that are timeless. Perhaps the Truth is attained through pure thought.

Perhaps there was a political solution, though in the ruins of one that seemed the least likely. The Truth is not just as an account of what there is. It is also a recipe for how to lead life. Contemplation is wasted when action is required to improve an

inequitable, unjust and inefficient world.

Perhaps the keeper of the Truth is education and its imperative to pursue knowledge. Perhaps the Truth is the embodiment of received wisdom that personifies all that is already known, all that is to be known and all that it is possible to know. Maybe the Truth is all things, including things it cannot be. But then how can it contain things that are not true?

My mind protested at this uncertainty, so I looked at my watch. It was 11 o'clock. Time for elevenses. I'll treat myself to a coffee in a café. Whatever the Truth may be, it can surely wait for that.

Lunch, dinner, tea are essential signposts of the day marked by food, celebrated and served at the Archer Street Café in pounds, shillings and pence. Coffee at 17 shillings. Tea for a ten shilling note. A traditional Suburban breakfast for £2 7/-. And for me a cup of coffee and a small slice of cake for just over a guinea.

The café was quite typical of the Suburbs. It was adorned by flowery wallpaper, pictures of distant meadows and valleys, a vase of plastic flowers on each Formica covered table and plastic chairs secured firmly to the floor as a precaution against theft. The café was neither empty nor full, maintaining a comfortable middle ground where there were people to look at, but none with their elbows up against mine. The other customers hardly warranted attention, being the usual collection of shoppers and shift-workers either alone like me and avoiding eye contact at all cost, or in company and focusing their eyes exclusively on each other and their ears to the affairs of the Suburbs. The state of the roads. The perennial litter problem. The rubbish on television these days.

But almost all conversation came to an uneasy halt when the door of the café

tinkled open and a black woman entered. Very few strangers ever visit the Suburbs, and usually they're visitors from other suburbs. But a black person. Very rare! This in itself was remarkable, but her impact was compounded by her wearing rather more skimpy clothes than is normal for the Suburbs. In fact, the unspoken thought reverberating among the blue rinses and hairpins was that she was barely decent.

All her clothes were white, in significant contrast to the blackness of her skin: a white slip supported her substantial breasts, but revealed her midriff, a short flared skirt that just about obscured her knickers, short white ankle socks and white tennis shoes. She looked as if she might have just finished playing tennis on an exceptionally hot day. Her beaded hair dropped onto bare shoulders, obscuring the straps of her slip.

She walked nonchalantly to the counter and ordered a cup of tea, handed over a ten guinea note and expressed delight at all the change she was given in return. She then picked up her tea, balanced a plastic spoon and several white cubes of sugar on the saucer, and then, for the first time since she'd entered, looked around the café. She gave an amused smile, strode over to my table and sat in the seat opposite me despite there being several other empty tables. This woman was definitely not Suburban! No one from the Suburbs would ever be so presumptuous or intrusive.

She put the plastic spoon into the cup and started stirring the tea, while looking directly at me.

"Hello, my name's Anna," she belatedly introduced herself. "You don't mind me sitting here, do you?"

"No, of course not," I said warily.

“The Suburbs are jolly odd!” She announced. “I’ve never been anywhere so blinking reserved. You come from the Suburbs, don’t you?” I nodded. “Me, I come from the borough of Baldam. Near the University City of Lambdeth. I’ve been travelling around, and made it to the Suburbs.” She glanced around at the porcelain ornaments of country people on horses. “And I wonder now if it was ever such a good idea coming here. What do you think?”

In the Suburbs, people never ask such direct questions. Especially not people they’ve never met before or who introduce themselves without the usual excuses.

I coughed. “The Suburbs has its own virtues. I’m sure there’s some aspect of it you’d like.”

“It’s so boring!” exclaimed Anna, ignoring my comment. “Perhaps that’s its appeal. There just doesn’t seem to be any life here at all. It’s dead! And no one wants to know you. Honestly, everyone looks at me as if I’ve arrived from the moon. I’m not that odd! I don’t have four hooves or a furry tail. I don’t have claws and sharp little teeth. Everyone here looks so much the same. And they behave like the whole world was the Suburbs. They’re jolly polite enough, if you ask them the way, but they say as little as they can.”

Anna looked at me past the condiments in flowery plastic containers and grinned broadly. The whiteness of her eyes and teeth penetrated through the Suburban air like beacons, tantalising advertisements of another world of attitudes and lifestyle.

“Er, what do you do?” I asked, not sure whether a question that would in Suburban circles be almost as automatic as a reference to the weather or the dreadful traffic was really appropriate.

Anna laughed, and somewhat loudly for a Suburban café. I could feel heads

turn and eyes gaze malevolently towards us. I'd never be able to eat at this café again in anything like my former anonymity.

“Goodness! What a jolly funny question! I just do what I blooming well like. Shouldn't everyone?”

I persevered. “I mean, what do you do for a living?”

“Oh! This and that! Whatever makes enough money, you know.” She beamed in paroxysms of silent mirth. “I suppose you're also going to ask why I'm in the Suburbs. You people are so predictable!” She picked up her cup and sipped from it. She put it down with a look of mild disgust. “The tea's so strong here! And the coffee so weak! I'm in the Suburbs because I like to travel about the country. Get out and about, you know. I suppose people in the Suburbs never do things like that!”

“You just travel about the country?”

“When I'm not staying in my flat in Baldam, or with friends in the City, that's what I do. I spend about a half of my life in Baldam. It's a fantastic city. The rest of my time is divided between the City and the rest of the country. There's just so much to do in the City that just staying there's like travelling the rest of the world. Have you ever been to the City?”

I shook my head. “It's very expensive...”

“Incredibly expensive! Fabulously expensive!” Anna exclaimed. “Everything's much cheaper here! And whenever I'm in the City, I earn a bit of money. Then I've got more than enough money for everywhere else.” She fiddled with a gold ring on her finger which looked like it cost quite a few guineas. “But there's everything in the City! Everything! You've got to be jolly tired of life to be tired of the City! You can find whatever you want. Everything you could ever possibly want!”

I couldn't help wondering whether the Truth could also be found there, but I was sure that if I confronted Anna with that question she'd probably just think I was trying to be amusing.

"The City is the opposite of the Suburbs," she continued. "Where it's so predictable here, it's totally inconstant and erratic there! Where it's quiet here, it's bedlam there! Where there's nothing to do here, there's everything to do in the City! And yet," Anna surveyed the Suburban world through the curtain-draped café windows, "it's mostly people from the Suburbs who work in the City." She frowned as if perplexed by this paradox. "How is it," she asked me, running a bejewelled hand through her hair, "that Suburbanites can go to the City every day and never seem to have ever been there? It's as if they never actually see the place they're in."

Anna laid a wrist down on the table and studied her silver and gold bangles. She looked up at me. "Yes," she grinned. "They are worth a bit, this jewellery, but I'm not rich. I've just known some really wealthy people. You do, you know, going to Night Clubs and things in the City and being, you know, an Independent Woman. But although I wouldn't say no (not flipping likely!) if someone offered me a lot of money, I just don't think that money's what I really want out of life."

"Why's that?" I wondered, hearing for the first time what was heresy in the Suburbs where the measure of success in life was the size of one's pension at retirement. If material wealth wasn't the object of work, and if work wasn't the object of life, then what could be?

"I don't know," Anna answered noncommittally, perhaps sensing the discomfiture her view had caused. "I just think that the pursuit of wealth gets in the way of enjoying it. And how much more enjoyment does a billion guineas give you that

a million guineas couldn't? It's just too much flipping trouble. And people who're rich ... okay, they're not exactly miserable, but I don't think their happiness is in direct relation to how much they earn."

"What makes you happy?"

Anna grinned with a quizzical furrowing of her brows. "You people ask the oddest things! What makes anyone happy? What's happy? But in the City I like going out. You know, there are loads of Night Clubs in the City. Night Clubs for the wealthy. The young. Everyone. But not," she glanced at a blue rinsed couple nearby, "I suspect, for people in the Suburbs. I just like to go out and dance the night away. What do you expect me to do?"

"Does everyone go to Night Clubs?"

"Well, not everyone. Not everyone can afford to. You know, there are some people, even in the City, who're what you call poor. No nightclubbing for them."

"Are they very poor?"

"You don't have poor people in the Suburbs, do you?" contemplated Anna. "Or if you do, they're kept hidden away like a dirty secret. The poor live in the East End of the City. The City is like two different places glued together. On the one side, there's the City of money, wealth and privilege. On the other side, in tatty, unplanned disarray, there are the rundown churches, dilapidated pavements, gutted shops, and bored people sitting by the roadside throwing stones at each other. Mind you, I'm not so sure there's anything very much more to do here in the Suburbs. I haven't even seen a cinema here. Do you have anything like that?"

"No, not really. In the Suburbs, most people's entertainment is at home. Mostly on television."

“Ugh! How horrible! I never watch television myself. I’d rather go out and see a film or a play. There’s so much culture in the City! There are cinemas and theatres showing plays and films of the most elevated classical art, obscure avant-garde films, popular entertainment, pornography, comedies, everything. So, what can you watch on television?”

I described some of the situation comedies, quiz shows, soap operas and general entertainment screened on Suburban television. Anna seemed horrified. “I’m no art critic,” she admitted, “but it does appear fairly incontrovertible that the Suburban audience is irredeemably plebeian and Philistine! Isn’t the value of a society best judged by the culture it produces and consumes? Suburban culture is no culture at all!”

I was slightly affronted by this opinion, though I couldn’t think of any defence except to say that different standards prevailed in the Suburbs.

“Well,” mused Anna reflectively, “It’s a funny old world! And I’ve certainly not seen all of it! There are strange stories you hear of the most peculiar places hidden in the most unlikely places.”

“What sort of places?”

“Weird places. Places that can be found in Police Telephone Boxes, through wardrobes, at the top of mountains, at the end of rainbows, all sorts of places. But I’m not sure what I think of things like that. Corn circles. UFOs. Weeping virgins. But one thing I’m sure is that there is just so much hidden and unknown.”

“Surely science will find them,” I said.

“Science could never solve all problems. Science is about demonstrable quantifiable truths. And the Truth is probably not that. But scientists are certainly

having a jolly good go at it. In the City, there's an absolutely fantastically big building. The Academy, it's called. And all the scientists are there. Looking for the Truth, I suppose. Or just studying things for their own sake. Things like zoology, equestrianism, aerial mechanics, lots of things."

"That sounds fascinating!" I commented, taken by Anna's reference to the Truth.

"There's just so much to learn," admitted Anna. She swallowed the last of her tea in a single gulp and looked desultorily at the empty cup. "So many places to go! The world's such a big place. And different countries have such incredibly strange cultures. There are republics and kingdoms. Democracies and dictatorships. There are countries at war. So many different languages, religions and customs." She leaned forward. "You've not been anywhere abroad have you?"

"No. I've never left the Suburbs," I admitted.

"The Suburbs are as much a state of mind as a place," commented Anna mysteriously. "You don't have to leave the country to see different things. Even in this country there's an incredible variety of people and customs. Some boroughs and counties are quite repressive and others are very open. Some are jolly dangerous. Some are boring, like the Suburbs. But boredom is not the worst! Or perhaps it is!"

Anna glanced up at the clock just above the counter where the second hand circumnavigated a design of flowers and fluffy rodents.

"I suppose I ought to be going," she announced. She eased herself up out of the chair with a slightly embarrassed look. "Well, I'm leaving the Suburbs now. I'm going back to Lambdeth." She straightened herself up. "It's been jolly interesting talking to you. You know, if I were you, I'd get out of the Suburbs. See a

bit of the world beyond. You don't have to prepare yourself or anything. Just pack your bag and go. It's a big world outside and you mustn't just ignore it."

With that advice she bade me goodbye and borne by the wind of Suburban disapprobation she sailed out of the café and into the sunlit streets. I watched her black and white figure recede into the distance, bending the necks of the curious as she passed by.

Perhaps, I thought, turning back my head to the somewhat unsatisfactory normality of the café, the Truth could be found through escape from the Suburbs.

Philosophical musings pursued me beyond lunch time, beyond dinner time and onto nine o'clock that evening, when I was too restless to do anything than wander about the Suburbs. My wandering then lacked even the direction that guided me now through the ruin of a shattered world. My feet took me to a part of the Suburbs I'd never been to before. Late commuters galloped past me on the way home from work, carrying briefcases, umbrellas and bowler hats.

However unfamiliar this district was, I didn't expect to see a tall figure loom out of the dark shadows, several feet larger than a human being, wearing a tri-cornered hat and a long overcoat. Now I would find it a somewhat comforting sight, but on that evening I froze in fear and stared down the street at a pair of piercing eyes. This was not the usual stray fox, cat or rat one would expect to see in the Suburbs at night. This was clearly something very different. The figure towered mysteriously, casting a long shadow from a street lamp. Then it turned round and lumbered off, gradually receding into the distance.

I stood shaken by the sight. Where did that apparition come from and what did it portend? The headlamps and the low roar of a passing car brought me back to the

ordinary world. Perhaps I'd just imagined it.

Another car's headlights caught me in its beam and projected an extending shadow ahead of me. As it came close, the car slowed and, on overtaking me, pulled gently to a halt. This was another unusual sight in the Suburbs: a limousine with foreign number-plates, twice the length of an ordinary car. The passenger's door opened and a portly shadow emerged onto the pavement, turned round to ease the door shut and passed comments through the window to the silhouetted figures inside. Then this figure ambled towards me.

It was a rather fat gentleman wearing brightly coloured shorts with a camcorder strapped around his neck and a floral short-sleeved shirt.

"Hiya," he announced himself. "Ya know your way round here?"

"Well, yes," I admitted.

"Perhaps then y'all be able to help us. We're lost. One goddamn street here is just the same as another. And nobody knows this area any more'n we do."

"Nobody?"

"We've been driving around for hours and I'm sure we've been back to this spot before. It's one goddamn maze here. All roads go back to where they started. Me and my pals are totally lost. Back home things ain't like this, I can tell you! Back home things are much better. Bigger houses, all with swimming pools. The roads are wider and there are signs to help you. Here, it's just row after row of the same goddamn houses. And you people are so goddamn suspicious. You'd think we'd come from another planet rather than another country. You people here are real weird."

"Do you mean just in the Suburbs?"

"Gee! I don't know! But your Suburbs are the weirdest! We've seen a lot of

your little old country and none of what we've seen so far's anything like this! We've just been driving through the Country. That's so goddamn quaint. Some of what you've got here looks like it's not changed for millions of years!"

"I've never been to the Country," I confessed.

"You ain't!" the tourist exclaimed. "There sure is a heck of a lot to see. We were real impressed by the Art Gallery on the border of the Suburbs. A heck of a weird place for an Art Gallery! Especially one as big as that! I don't know doodly squat about Art but I'm sure I saw some real famous stuff there! You must've been there. It ain't no distance from here!"

"I've not been there either."

"You ain't been nowhere!" the tourist exclaimed. "But then you live here. You've got your whole goddamn life to see everything, ain't you?"

The tourist then asked for directions to the Centaur Hotel, which I was thankfully able to give. It was a little complicated, so I drew a map on the back of an envelope, carefully marking all the straight lines and square parks that mapped out the Suburbs. He seemed genuinely grateful and shook my hand warmly as he left.

"You must see more of the world, you know!" he advised me, as he wandered back to his car with the camcorder bouncing on his belly. He opened the door, and within seconds the car glided away leaving the street lonelier than before.

As I walked home, it seemed that my thoughts and encounters this day were leading only one way. Little knowing where it would take me, I resolved at that moment to leave the Suburbs and search for the Truth. I was sure I was not the first person to make the same decision. And why not me?

The reasons for doing so seemed overwhelmingly compelling. I was convinced

from talking to Anna and the tourist that there was a larger, more exciting world beyond. A world that offered so much more than the Suburbs ever could. I imagined myself fighting against giant rats and drunken centaurs, in shining armour, a sword and shield in hand, and finally discovering the Truth. The Holy Grail. Alpha and Omega. However, if I knew then what I knew now, maybe I would have thought differently.

And then, after a night of restless musing, breakfast once more. The start of another day in the Suburbs. In front of me was food for the day ahead and in the background the television. Outside the house, the world was waking up to the sounds of the Suburbs. And today, I decided, was to be my day of departure.

My mind was in total turmoil. Wasn't I just leaving on an ill-considered and possibly contrived fancy? What was I expecting to find? Wouldn't I be better off staying put in the Suburbs? What could I achieve? Where was I expecting to go? And where would I start?

I started where everyone leaving the Suburbs does: at the Railway Station, one of the grandest buildings in the Suburbs, the point from which trains leave every day packed with commuters on their way to work. I was in the general mêlée of commuting, jostled gently from side to side by people anxious to catch the 08.01 or the 08.11 or the late 07.24. What I still hadn't chosen was my destination.

I looked at the computerised destination board broadcasting accurately to the second exactly how much each train was late or going to be late. At the top of the board were the trains first scheduled to leave - most to the City - and as each one departed the entire board rumbled as the destinations below shuffled up to take a new position of prominence in the list. Commuters stared apprehensively at the board and then trickled towards a ticket kiosk or streamed past the ticket inspector with their

annual or monthly train passes held up in pride. I was in much less of a hurry and not at all sure which platform to head to.

I studied a map that showed the route taken by each train, colour-coded and totally out of scale. The two focal points of the map were the Suburbs and the City, with the latter and all its associated stations occupying a third of the entire space of the map. I wanted to go somewhere different. Somewhere with a name I'd never heard of, that suggested a world a thousand miles or a thousand years away from Suburban concerns. A tiny little place like Gotesdene.

I settled on this destination totally by chance, and queued up at the counter behind a commuter with a rolled newspaper discussing the relative merits of a leave-on-Friday-and-return-on-Monday ticket over a Long Weekend Ticket for the same days at a different cost. When he'd finally resolved the discussion to his satisfaction, I breathlessly requested a single to Gotesdene.

The ticket clerk typed the name into a console which issued a single ticket. He briefly explained that it was a two-stage journey on a four-phase fare matrix system. I would change at Ratford Central to get a steam train which stopped at Gotesdene on its journey to Lambdeth Peccadillo. The four phases of the fare were spelt out in pounds, shillings, pence and farthings, which I paid in a mixture of gold, silver and bronze. The train was standing on Platform One.

I sat nervously on a hard and threadbare seat in a tatty compartment, watching the commuters run towards it and jump on. Then, with a loud whistle and a wave of the station guard's flag, the train growled with anticipation and purred out of the station. As the train shunted off, I took what I thought then, but know better now, was my last glimpse of the rows upon rows of houses, parks and roads that compose

Suburbia.

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Before the train had travelled very far, I knew for sure that I had left the Suburbs behind. The ragged hedges no longer enclosed well tended lawns and flower-beds, but rather rectangles of crops, occasionally enlivened by a clump of trees. Goats roamed freely about, sometimes raising their heads to watch the train going by.

The transition from the Suburbs to the Countryside was apparent not only outside the train but also inside. The presence of Suburbanites reading newspapers or staring blankly through the carriage window was steadily replaced by a broader mix of people, representing the people who live in the Country. The composition of passengers changed as the train stopped, paused and then moved on again from rustic Country station platforms. At one station, several rats in precisely made and appropriately tiny clothes clambered into a nearby compartment by steps provided for the smaller railway customer.

At each station, a loudspeaker trailed off a list of destinations and, just as the train was beginning to leave, recommenced the list from the beginning. By this means I was aware that the train was approaching the station where I would change trains for Gotesdene. The train shook, shuddered and clanked as it steadied to a halt. I reluctantly sacrificed the warmth of my seat and disembarked onto the busy platform.

Barley Junction was quite a different station from the one I had left in the Suburbs. Goats jostled freely about the platform place, some entering the train I'd just left and some trotting out of it. One goat with a station porter's cap and an official uniform was bleating more loudly and insistently than the others, and I soon

became aware that it was he who was broadcasting the platform announcements. It took a few moments to adapt my ear to his rustic bleat, but presently I managed to couple the name Gotesdene with an appropriate platform number and with this information I headed over the station bridge, sidestepping the family of rats I had seen before, and descended to where a Steam Train was waiting.

Being completely unfamiliar with the customs of the area - so different from the Suburbs - I looked for an indicator board that might confirm to me that this train, emitting large clouds of black smoke from its funnel, was the one I wanted, but there was no digital display unit to be found anywhere. There was only a wooden sign protruding from a post, with a list of names including that of Gotesdene. So this was it! I searched for an empty compartment, opened the door and sat on a hard upholstered seat by the window and watched the bustle of activity outside.

There were the bleats of goats to one other: some advertising tea and newspapers. Above all this, was the more resonant voice of the station master listing where the train was due to stop. To lessen the platform din, and avoid the unpleasant smell of smoking coal, I pulled up the carriage window which promptly cocooned me from the world outside. I was alone in the company of two facing rows of upholstery, two opposing mirrors and advertisements for dental chewing gum, rat-killer, the Green Party and the Times.

I was not alone for long. The carriage door opened and in poked the head of a young woman about my age. "Is this compartment free?" she asked.

"Why certainly," I said in a slightly panicked voice. This was not merely because her presence had perturbed my composure, but also by her physical appearance. Partly this was due to the strangeness of her long straight green hair which

cascaded down beyond her shoulders and to her waist. Mostly however this was due to the fact that she wore no clothes whatsoever. This was not a sight often seen in the Suburbs. Her pale but warm and friendly face was illuminated by sparkling bright green eyes.

“Then you won’t mind us joining you,” she continued, climbing into the compartment. Her bare feet walked obliviously over the varnished floorboards and she sat on the seat immediately opposite me. I was uncomfortably conscious of her bare apple-round breasts and the green bush of hair between her crossed thighs. She was followed by a boy of about fifteen also with green hair, but in his case styled into a neat short back and sides, and wearing an outfit that would not look out of place in the Suburbs. Indeed only the colour of his hair might ever attract any comment. His face was also pale, but the eyes failed to illuminate it at all. He sat next to the girl and I felt sure I could see a family resemblance.

“My name’s Beta and this is my brother,” continued the girl with an unselfconscious openness very rare in the Suburbs. “We’re off to the City of Lambdeth. Do you know it?”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“I’ve never been there myself, but Bacon has. He’s going to college there and I’m escorting him.”

“Not that I need escorting!” the boy sniffed unenthusiastically. “I’m just pleased to get away from the Country. It’s about time I moved into the Modern Age. I’m had enough of the ignorance and backwardness of the Village.”

“Oh, Bacon!” Beta responded. “You don’t have to be so harsh on the Village. It’s where we’ve lived all our lives.”

“Progress has just passed us by,” Bacon continued. “The years go by and the Village and the Country just remain the same.” He looked at me with a sardonic smile. “You just wouldn’t believe how primitive the Village is. If you went there you’d think you’d been through a time warp.”

“It’s the way it is because its way of life has been so successful over the years,” defended Beta. “Why change a place where people are quite happy with things as they are?” She leaned forward towards me, her hair falling off her shoulders and breasts to drop in curtains of green in front of her. “What do you think?”

As I had no wish to offend either the attractive naked girl or her brother I decided to be diplomatic. “I don’t know your village, so I really can’t comment.”

“It’s so beautiful and natural! A sweet little brook babbles alongside a wood and open fields, and goats and other animals wander freely in the lanes. Everyone is friendly and helpful - and, excepting my brother, nobody feels the need to wear clothes...”

“So? How primitive can you get!” Bacon snorted. “If dressing like savages was so wonderful, how come it’s not more universal? People in the Suburbs wear clothes. And so do people in Lambdeth. Babbling brooks and goats aren’t everything! You didn’t mention, Beta, that the roads are unmetalled; the electricity is unreliable and intermittent; the water still comes from a well; there are no street-lamps and the only transport we’ve got is oxen-, goat- or mule-driven. It’s only a paradise if you think deprivation’s a good thing.”

“But you don’t need all those things if everything else is fine...”

“How can it be? The Village is barely self-sufficient at the moment. It produces very little surplus product and not many people from elsewhere are enthusiastic about

buying our organic vegetables and dairy products. It won't be long until the Village will have to diversify its production or everyone will starve."

"Who says the Village will starve! Everyone has enough to eat now. Nobody's unhappy."

"It'll happen! Nowhere can last forever contented on just enough surplus to afford a single television for the whole Village and hardly any of the other luxuries that people in, for instance, the Suburbs take for granted. One bad harvest and the Village will collapse!"

"There have been people saying that for centuries and it's never happened!" Beta indignantly retorted. "All that's happened is that more people like you predict it to try and get people to change their ways. And it is self-fulfilling prophecy when people like you leave and it becomes more difficult for the Village to get by."

"And what's wrong with me for wanting to do that? If there's a better world beyond, why not go for it!"

At that moment, the train discharged sounds of scraping, puffing and snorting, and then accompanied by a chorus of cries, particularly from the station announcer, the Steam Train slowly puffed out of the station. Bacon and Beta dropped their conversation to watch Barley Junction recede behind and green fields open up ahead.

As the train settled into its rhythm of railway-track breaks and occasional hoots, I continued the halted conversation: "There are certainly a lot of goats around here! Far more than you'd ever meet in the Suburbs!"

"That just demonstrates how much more Progressive the Suburbs are!" agreed Bacon. "You're right. There are far too many goats in the Countryside. There really

should be fewer of them.”

“Now you’re being unfair to goats!” complained Beta with a frown.

“They smell. They eat anything and everything. Left to their own resources they’d just eat the entire Countryside and we’d be left with nothing but desert”

“But they still have rights just like everyone else. You can’t dismiss them just like that.”

“Yes, you can! The issue is quite straightforward. There are too many goats! What you’ve got to do is reduce the number. And if it involves deportation or birth control then so be it.”

“Or anything else, I suppose?” wondered Beta sadly.

“Exactly so!” Bacon said adamantly. “Goats are a menace, and they’ve got to be eliminated by one means or another!”

I could see that I hadn’t chosen as safe a topic for conversation as I’d thought, but I listened as the two siblings discussed what Bacon termed the Goat Problem. Some of his solutions were quite drastic and not too dissimilar to some I’d occasionally heard in the Suburbs when considering eliminating vermin. “It’s entirely a question of Progress!” Bacon insisted. “There should never be obstacles set in its way. We’re all better off in the end - Goats too! - if less attention were paid to the finer feelings of the outmoded and obsolete...”

“For no fault of their own!” Beta interrupted.

“It doesn’t matter! If there is any purpose to life at all, it must be the pursuit of Progress and Truth!”

I was just about to rejoin the conversation to announce my own interest in the Truth, when the engine released a series of hoots as it noisily came to a halt at another

station. This one was extremely small, consisting of a platform, a derelict ticket office and a waiting room. A border of flowers and vegetables brightened the platform and beyond there was nothing but an uninterrupted series of open fields with a few scattered windmills in the distance.

“We’ll be here for *ages*!” complained Bacon. “The train always is.”

Beta stood up and pulled down the window. Instantly, the Country air rushed in, carrying the smell of hay and the buzz of little insects. “I don’t see why that should be!” she commented as she leaned her shoulders on the top of the pulled-down window, her head and mass of hair outside and her bare bottom sticking out in front of my nose. The sun sparkled on her cheeks and lit up her hair, revealing long thin strands that floated about.

“Last time I was here I had to wait while they were shoosing some animals off the tracks. I’m sure they were goats! You wouldn’t get such gross inefficiency in Baldam I’m sure!”

Beta ignored her brother. “It’s such a nice place here!” she remarked cheerfully. “There’s a whitewashed wooden church over there. And a little château. And some donkeys trotting by on their way to the fields.” She leaned out even further, her arms straightened, her buttocks tautened and her face soaking in the warm morning Sun. “And there’s a large mouse there!”

“A mouse! Are you sure? Not a rat or something like that?” sniffed Bacon.

“I’ve known enough rats and mice to know the difference!” Beta retorted. “And I do believe this mouse is Tudor!”

“Tudor!” snorted her brother, leaning over to peer through the window himself. “Why should he be catching a train I wonder?”

Beta didn't answer, but instead waved her arms and shouted. "Tudor! Over here! Tudor!"

I peered through the window to see what this mouse might be like, but I didn't expect to see one standing upright nearly five foot tall, wearing a smart blue jerkin, red codpiece and stockings with a ruff round his neck just below the muzzle. He was bareheaded with whiskers proudly displayed, bright eyes prominent in grey-brown fur and large flat ears twitching with a life of their own. He waved a gloved paw at Beta and strode towards us in red boots while his other paw supported a sheathed sword secured to his waist.

"Beta!" he cried. "'Tis thou! How dost? Art alone?"

"No, I'm with Bacon. We're off to Baldam. Come and share the carriage with us!" Beta pulled her head in through the window to enable Tudor to open the compartment door.

"Verily shalt I!" Tudor said resolutely, as he pulled himself in. "'Tis most happy and meet that I should so encounter ye!" He nodded at Bacon and me, and removed his belt and sword which he placed on the luggage rack above my head. He then sat next to me, facing Bacon, his long scaly tail winding around behind him and falling discreetly onto the compartment floor. He crossed his short legs, his boots reaching nearly up to his knee.

"Good morrow, sire," he addressed me. "Art thou also bound for Baldam?"

"No," answered Bacon on my behalf. "He's not one of our party at all."

"I come from the Suburbs," I explained.

"The Suburbs!" mused the mouse flicking his tail slightly. "'Tis a borough to which I have never been. Art many such as I there?"

“No, not at all,” I answered honestly. “I’ve never seen anyone like you in the Suburbs.”

“‘Tis pity,” he sighed. “Thou know’st me not. I am hight Tudor as Beta hath told thee and I abide in mine estate many a league distant from here.” He looked up at Beta and Bacon. “‘Tis rare I should venture so far afield, but I have affairs to attend in Rattesthwaite. Dost thou know’t?”

“It’s further down the line,” remarked the boy.

“‘Tis so,” Tudor acknowledged. The train shunted forward and back unbalancing the mouse and forcing him to grip my arm with his sharp claws to avoid falling to the floor. The train hooted and a cloud of sooty dust floated past the window. It then puffed off. The mouse clung painfully to my arm as the platform receded. While the train was moving, I observed a large hoarding featuring two hands held together. **Better Together!** it read ambiguously. I bent my head around to watch it go by and caught a glimpse of green writing at the foot of the poster, featuring a person’s name and a green cross in a box.

“It’s not long till the General Election, is it?” commented Beta noting the poster.

“General Election?” I wondered. “Is there one due soon?”

“Where have you been?” sneered Bacon. “Of course there is! Perhaps the most important one this country’s ever known!”

“I just didn’t know about it,” I admitted. It can’t have seemed so important in the apolitical Suburbs. “Which parties are contesting it?”

“Oh! The usual six,” commented Beta putting up one hand of outspread fingers and a thumb. She then withdrew all but her index finger. “There’s the Red Party.

They're the left wing party."

"Bloody communists!" snorted Bacon. "They'll have us all living like peasants."

Tudor snorted equally disdainfully. "'Sblood! 'Twill be but the rule of the *mobus populus*. 'Twould be a disaster unpareil an 'twere they to govern."

Beta raised a second finger. "Then there's the Blue Party. They're the right wing party. That's the one Bacon supports, I think."

"Dashed right I will!"

"Then there's the Green Party. They're the ones I quite like. They're the party of the Countryside, tradition and environment." Beta now had three fingers standing, and then before her brother could comment on her choice, she hurried on by raising a fourth finger. "Then the Black Party. I think Bacon's got some sympathy for them, but even he doesn't like the militaristic aspect of the party or their dislike for foreigners." She raised her thumb. "The Illicit Party, which is quite a new one, and I'm not sure what they're about. And finally," she raised the thumb of her other hand, "there's the White Party and I don't know what they represent at all either."

"I don't think even they do!" scoffed Bacon. He smiled at me. "Perhaps you do. I read somewhere that they always do well in the Suburbs."

"Yes they do," I agreed, but I couldn't answer what they represented. They always appeared to win local elections by fighting for such local issues as clearer markings on public highways, more books in the public library and more flower shows. Their candidates seemed frightfully nice and when they spoke it was hard to identify any policy they advocated that one could actively oppose. "But what's so very important about this General Election?"

“I thought this kind of gross ignorance was confined to the Country,” said Bacon disparagingly. “It’s to break up the Coition Government that’s been running this country - badly! - for as long as anyone can remember. They’ve changed the constitution such that whichever party wins will become the sole government and not have to work with all the other parties.”

“How are they doing that?” I wondered.

“It’s terribly complicated,” Beta continued. “Something to do with how the votes will be transferred. But as a result they hope that it will resolve the mess the government’s got into - you know, with never being able to make a decision without it being vetoed by some minority interest in the Coition.”

“What sort of mess is the government in?”

“Perhaps it just doesn’t affect people in the Suburbs,” Bacon commented, “but everywhere else things have just drifted aimlessly for years. There’s virtually no central government at all. Everything is decided at a local level and in the meantime there’s a ridiculous budget deficit, foreign policy is totally ineffectual, the taxation system is creaking at the seams and not one part of the country fits well with any other part. In one part of the country the roads are metalled and well-signposted, but as soon as your car enters another borough, the dual carriageway abruptly becomes a pot-holed dirt-track. In some districts the cars even drive on different sides of the road. The gauge on the railways are all different, so that you can’t travel any distance by train without having to change. And the cost of things just varies ridiculously from one place to another.”

“I’sooth!” agreed Tudor. “‘Tis great need for consistency in the nation. ‘Tis all chaos and confusion.”

“Who do you think will form the next government?” I asked.

“Nobody knows!” exclaimed Beta. “Past results are just no guide apparently. I’d like it to be the Green Party, but there’s probably not enough support for them in the City or the Suburbs.”

“I pledge my support for the Blue Party,” Tudor said, twitching his whiskers agitatedly. “But in truth there is but little in them that I love. I have sympathies for the Black Party, but they too are unlikely to triumph. ‘Twill not be an ideal result for me, I fear.”

“I’ve also got sympathies with the Blacks,” Bacon confessed, “but they aren’t sufficiently committed to Progress or the Modern World. However, they *are* more honest than the Blue Party and if they were in power they’d definitely get things moving! I too would like to see a final solution to the Cat problem, end all these damaging industrial disputes and make the nation strong again. Nevertheless, informed opinion says that it will be a fight between the Red, Blue and White Parties and I know which of those I prefer!”

The train came to another halt at a platform equally as remote as the one before. In the commotion of arrival, conversation came to a halt and Beta once again took the opportunity to pull down the window and stick her head and shoulders out through it. I also peered out and saw a Cat about the same size as Tudor sitting on his rear on a platform bench beside another poster for the Green Party. Like Tudor, he was fully clothed with only his head and front paws showing. He was reading a newspaper and wore looser clothes than Tudor, but nonetheless quite colourful ones. They were a blend of black, gold, green and blue, with trousers that reached to his knees below which he wore white stockings and buckled shoes. His jerkin was

decorated by a flamboyant lace frill around the neck, and like Tudor he carried a sword attached to a belt round his waist. Beside him and lying on the bench was a large broad-brimmed hat with a magnificent feather sprouting from it. He didn't appear at all interested in our train and must have been waiting for another one.

"That's another sight you don't often see in the Suburbs," I commented absently. "Cats like that are just not common at all."

"If only 'twere the same everywhere!" sighed Tudor. "Wouldst 'twere fewer Cats altogether. Sooth, I am content he hath no wish to embark."

The train didn't stop for very long, and soon chuffed off leaving the feline beneath the station clock. "I detest Cats!" hissed Tudor. "Throughout history they have been a great enemy to mine people. It matters not which continent nor island Mice have settled, Cats have ever pursued us mercilessly and caused great grief. I trow 'tis but for jest they do molest us. They kill us for their sport as we might kill flies. And still now they pursue us: disinheriting and enslaving us." He looked at me, his whiskers twitching agitatedly and his tail flicking up and down with a ponderous rhythm. "Ere now, in the historic land of Mice, we art under the occupation of the illegitimate Kingdom of Cats. A Kingdom recognised by many nations but intent only on the supremacy of the Feline scourge. In mine historic home there be Cats where once Mice stood tall. 'Tis said 'tis but fair recompense for many centuries of Feline persecution, but 'tis verily unjust that now 'tis Mice who art scattered like pollen on the wind throughout the world. 'Tis now my kind who art the servile class in many a land, bereft of an ancestral home or spiritual centre."

"Have you personally been dispossessed?" I wondered.

"Ay, spiritually!" sighed Tudor. "In my heart and soul I too have been

dispossessed, but - thanks be to the Lord! - not in mine means. Mice have been in this land for many centuries. Mice who have struggled hard against injustice and prejudice. And to them I owe my wealth and repute.” He rested a paw on his sword which I was afraid he might choose to unsheathe. “‘Tis the Cats I hate. ‘Tis they who have raped Mice of their land and forced subservience to their pagan ways. ‘Twere best that Cats wert dealt with as they deserve. E’en here - far from the timeless struggle ‘twixt Mouse and Cat - there be cause to hate Cats who bring misery and grief by their ruthless exploitation of the wealth and riches of this land. ‘Tis they more than any other who have brought this land to such a sorry state - and any support I hath for the Black Party ist in recognition of their fine words in this crusade.”

It wasn’t long until the train came to another stop where the name of Rattesthwaite was clearly visible on the station platform. Tudor preened his whiskers with the claws of an ungloved paw. When the train finally ceased to shudder, he eased himself off the seat allowing his long tail to unravel behind him and fastened his belt and sword to his waist. Then he bade us all farewell as he got off the train.

“It probably wasn’t such a good idea to mention Cats with Tudor here!” Beta said as the Mouse hastened towards the ticket barrier brandishing a cardboard ticket where a goat was collecting them. “It’s a subject that’s bound to get him steamed up!”

“But essentially Tudor’s right!” butted in Bacon. “Cats have caused considerable misery to Mice. It’s a historic and unending conflict. And the Black Party is also right. The world *would* be a better place without Cats!”

“I just don’t think that’s true at all,” Beta argued. “How can anyone believe that Cats as individuals deserve to be treated any differently from anyone else?”

“But they *are* different and they’d be the first to say so! They are an alien

species who work only for their own individual benefit or the benefit of their kind in collusion with international capitalism to appropriate the wealth of the land and claim it as their own. I mean, have you ever come across a poor Cat?"

"Well, no! But it doesn't follow that all Cats are bad and I'm sure there are plenty that aren't particularly well-off."

"Essentially Cats despise everyone else. They ingratiate themselves on people with their purring and apparent affectionateness, but all they're concerned about is their own interests. And what they do is siphon the wealth of nations from where the Feline Diaspora has taken them and send it back to the Cat Kingdom."

"Even if that were true," argued Beta passionately, "it doesn't mean that Cats have to be locked in concentration camps, robbed of their wealth or methodically slaughtered as the Black Party proposes."

"That's only the view of a minority in the Black Party," disagreed Bacon. "The main source of misgiving is the Cat Kingdom itself. Ever since it was formed by the international community in the so-called historic homeland of the Cats - which so inconveniently overlaps the ancestral homeland of both Mice and Dogs - it's been nothing but a blight on this planet. Always having wars, always taking territory from other species in its own interest and creaming off the wealth of countries such as ours."

"What's true of the Cat Kingdom needn't be true for Cats as individuals!" Beta contested.

Bacon ignored her. "It's essentially to do with the Feline notion of Divine Right. Cats believe that they have a Divine Right to occupy their territories just as their King seems to believe he has to rule that territory. There's no democracy for the Cats - not like in our country, however inefficient. What the King commands is what the Cats

obey. Whatever nonsense he comes out with.” Bacon leaned forward towards me. “You wouldn’t believe the stupid decrees the King of the Cats issues on occasion. In a Kingdom where the population is absurdly out of control, there is no contraception or abortion. In a Kingdom where meat is in short supply for a carnivorous species there are ridiculous rules about what can and cannot be eaten. Rats, for instance, are classified as unclean and therefore not to be eaten in a Kingdom totally infested by them. All sorts of things are forbidden to the Cat. They have to stay at home one day a week and are forbidden to do anything but sleep. How can the Cats deserve to be part of the Modern World if they follow such idiotic decrees?”

“I agree that some of the ways in the Kingdom of Cats are a bit odd,” Beta retorted. “I’ve heard of how female Cats have to wear dresses which cover all their legs and ankles and have to attend different schools to Tom Cats. But what’s true of Cats in their Kingdom isn’t true of Cats everywhere.”

“Yes it is, Beta. It’s what distinguishes Cats from other species. It’s their religious and cultural views which say that they are different from everyone else. You might respect the Cats’ rights and freedoms, but I don’t think they’d respect yours or anyone else’s. If they are so wonderful, why is it that they’re constantly at war with their neighbours.”

“You mean the various Canine Republics? I don’t really know a lot about them, but they don’t appear to be blameless themselves!”

“They may not be blameless, but the Canine Republics have every reason to be aggrieved about the Cat Kingdom and the appalling way in which Dogs are treated there. Cats show no respect for the puritanical and literary traditions of Dogs in the land they’ve acquired. They even deny Dogs the right to read books written in

anything but the Feline language. They don't even allow dogs to bark in their own tongue. And do you think the Dogs relish the way that soldiers from the Kingdom intrude into their sovereign territories for what they call *security reasons*."

"Whatever you say about the Cat Kingdom," Beta asserted, "does not change my view at all that Cats are individuals who shouldn't be discriminated against on the basis of some characteristic that their species might have."

Bacon was just about to counter Beta's view, but decided instead to change the subject. "Anyway, I'm sure our travelling companion must be getting tired of all this talk about Cats."

"No, not at all!" I said politely.

"So, why are you going to Gotesdene? It's quite an odd place for someone from the Suburbs to be going to, isn't it?" Beta asked, leaning forward towards me so that her curtains of green hair cascaded onto her bare legs. "Do you know anyone there?"

"No, I don't!" I admitted. "In fact I don't know anything about it at all. I'm actually going there to search for the Truth."

Bacon laughed out loud. "The Truth! You expect to find the Truth in a primitive backwater like Gotesdene?"

"Well, I have to start somewhere," I feebly defended myself. "I was convinced that I wouldn't find the Truth in the Suburbs so I thought I might find it in a place absolutely different."

"Quite so!" agreed Beta. "And why not Gotesdene, indeed." She tossed a lock of hair back off her face revealing her bare bosom. "A search for the Truth is an excellent idea! Think what a better place the world would be if only we had

possession of the Truth. There'd be no wars. Everyone would be at peace because no one would be able to claim to be right and someone else wrong, when everyone knew who was right or not. With the Truth everyone everywhere would be rich - or as rich as they could be. Everyone would know all that they would need to know to be as wealthy as they desired. And with the Truth, there would be no more disease, no more pollution, no more injustice and everyone would be happy! It wouldn't be possible to argue like my brother and I do about issues like Cats because everyone would know the answer. And so would the Cats themselves. And there wouldn't be a need for General Elections because government wouldn't be determined by the whims of the people but rather according to the dictates of the Truth!"

"I don't see how the Truth would necessarily achieve all that!" sniffed Bacon. "And even if we had the Truth, would everyone necessarily agree on how to use it? And would it really be used for the best?"

"I'm sure it would!" Beta continued enthusing. "With the Truth, there'd be no cause for argument because everyone would agree about everything and I'm sure everyone would work towards the best for everyone else. Why should anyone ever do differently?"

"I'm just not so sure," Bacon countered. "I don't believe people's nature works like that. Knowledge of the Truth could easily be used for quite different purposes to those you imagine. It could well be that peace and prosperity are not determined by knowledge of the Truth anyway. Why should the Truth be concerned with the greater good of anyone?"

"It wouldn't be the Truth if it wasn't!" Beta replied idealistically.

"That's making an assumption about the Truth that simply cannot be made

before knowing what it is. And anyhow, I don't believe the Truth is a thing that you just find like a crock of gold or a holy grail. It must be an abstract entity beyond material dimensions, and you can't just expect to find it lying around. Do you expect to find it hidden underneath someone's bed? Or stored in a casket? Or buried in the ground? That makes nonsense of the whole concept of the Truth. No. The Truth is what will be found eventually as a result of scientific research - which is what I shall be pursuing in Lambdeth - and I am more likely to discover it in a test-tube than you will hanging around in archaic villages like Gotesdene. I don't believe it will be found in my lifetime; and probably not for many generations yet. But eventually it will be found as a result of empirical and scientific research coupled with the genius of individual scientists."

"You think that Science and Progress provide all the answers," Beta riposted. "I just can't believe that something like the Truth could possibly be found by something as dry and abstract as a mathematical equation or the formal proof of a theorem. If I could, I would join our companion here and search for the Truth with him. I don't know where it is any more than he does, but I doubt that the pursuit of Science and Progress is at all the same thing as the search for the Truth."

I was about to thank Beta for her support in my quest, when the train made another of its periodic hoots and drew noisily into another station. I took my eyes off Beta and focused on the platform where the platform name of **GOTESDENE** was displayed.

"This is it!" I announced.

"So this is where we part," smiled Beta. "What a funny little place!"

She was right. The station at Gotesdene was nothing more than a raised

wooden platform and a platform name painted quite crudely on an old wooden board. On the platform were several goats and rats, and around the station were open fields dotted by the occasional copse and windmill.

I proffered my farewells to Beta and Bacon, and clambered down onto the platform. I waved to Beta as the train shunted off as she leaned out the window, waving at me, her long hair lifted up by the rush of wind. The train puffed away into the distance, the funnel trailing black and white clouds as it departed.

I suddenly felt alone. I was at a place I'd never heard of before, quite clearly dissimilar in almost every way from the Suburbs. Instead of neat and tidy borders and hedges, pavements and roads, lampposts and television aerials, I was confronted by a neighbourhood of nothing but fields stretching away in all directions, bisected by the railway line from one horizon to another. Perpendicular to that and proceeding only towards one horizon was a long and winding brick road, barely wide enough for a small car to drive along. The platform was populated mostly by goats who were simply sitting about and not waiting for anything. Most of them had barely stirred when the train had arrived and paid no attention to its departure. A few watched me lethargically while chewing at hay or thistles, their tails occasionally flicking aside insects.

I jumped off the platform - there were no steps provided - and strolled to the brick road that didn't quite reach the station and terminated in a patch of dusty worn ground. Just by the road was a signpost which pointed along the length of the brick road to only one destination. As this read **Gotes Dene**, I decided to follow this dusty brick road to start my quest for the ultimate enigma.

3

Gotesdene and its surrounding environs were very different to the Suburbs I decided as I walked along the long and winding road. There was none of the obsessive order and neatness that characterises the Suburbs. Rather, the fields on either side were a quilted hodgepodge of crops with goats, oxen and other animals working on the land: pulling ploughs, walking around in circles to grind grain in primitive mills, gathering crops in their teeth and throwing the produce into the back of carts. On several occasions, I had to step off the brick road into dried mud to allow an oxen-pulled wagon to ponderously lumber by. The midday sun was beating down on me but there was no shelter to be seen: there were few trees in sight and most of these were far off the road with many branches torn off, and their trunks ravished by the gnawing goats. Swallows occasionally dove down past me chasing after the insects buzzing around the corpses of animals by the roadside.

After two or three miles of walking through this rural scenery with my feet getting increasingly sore, I at last arrived at a village. There was no doubt that this was the village of Gotesdene, as just outside the fence barricading it was a painted board supported by two wooden posts which welcomed me to the village and requested me to drive carefully. Large ornate metal gates broke the monotony of fencing, featuring the crest of a rampant goat and ox, and supported by two pillars crowned by identical statues of rampant elephants bearing arms.

Initially, I thought there might be some kind of toll required to enter the village as in front of the gates was a family of goats kneeling down by a wooden platter. They

bleated at me piteously in a dialect I couldn't understand at all, but I soon inferred that they were begging for alms: a practice long discontinued in the Suburbs. I pulled out a goat from my trouser pocket which I threw into the platter, believing this to be the absolute minimum that I could decently give. I wasn't at all prepared for the effusiveness with which the goat incomprehensibly expressed his gratitude. Although I could distinguish the occasional English word, I speculated that he was speaking a totally different language altogether.

I pushed open the gate, which creaked noisily as it resisted me, and ventured in. The village comprised a wide space of open land around which there were numerous wood and mud hovels, and was traversed by a dirt track from which the slightest breeze blew up clouds of dust. Goats, oxen and others wandered listlessly amongst the scattered waste and detritus. In the centre of the patch of common land there were a stocks, a gallows and a tall gaily coloured pole from which dangled multicoloured strands. There were also some tall oak trees and a tall stone cross.

A collection of market stalls was gathered at one end of the common. As I hadn't eaten since breakfast, I decided to look for a stall selling convenience food, such as a hamburger or a pizza. As I approached, I saw that there was little likelihood of buying a microwaved pizza, a deep-fried chicken or even chips. The stalls mostly sold agricultural implements, live chickens and vegetables. Many of these products flowed off the stalls and onto the ground, where decaying wicker baskets protected them from the dust and dirt. One stall was conducting a profitable trade in hay, around which gathered a crowd of acquisitive ungulates.

I understood very little of the stall-holders' cries, but I assumed that they were referring to their produce and how much a pound of this or an ounce of that would

cost. I soon observed that the cost of living here was substantially lower than that in the Suburbs. Very little cost less than a florin or half crown in the Suburbs, whilst most goods in the Gotesdene market were selling for under a penny. This explained the gratitude the beggar at the gate had shown for a groat. I thought I might have a problem finding a stall furnished with sufficient change for the smallest denomination coin I had on me.

I bought a pound of apples for a farthing from a vegetable stall and had to resort to gestures to express what I wanted. I carried the apples loose in my pockets - as like other buyers I was clearly expected to have brought my own basket to the market - together with innumerable ha'pennies and farthings of change. While biting into a small acidic apple, I found myself being addressed by a voice which despite a rustic accent I was at last able to understand.

"You don't speak Anglo-Saxon, I presume?" asked a relatively small white elephant standing upright, in very colourful silk clothes swathed by a long red cloak secured by a large brooch beneath the chin.

"No, I don't," I admitted through a mouthful of apple. "Is that what's spoken here?" I was surprised to find an elephant addressing me: especially by a white one, who I had heard was very rare. I had never spoken to an elephant, white or otherwise, before. He flapped his large ears using his trunk to pull his cloak together at the front. He had two quite short tusks, which nevertheless looked too dangerous to approach too closely.

"Ay, that is what they speak hereabouts," the White Elephant said. "Gotesdene is a very old-fashioned place. You, as an outsider, must find it extraordinarily undeveloped."

“It’s very different from the Suburbs.”

“Very antiquated,” the White Elephant continued. “But it is the village for which I have the honour to serve as mayor. And as so, I feel it to be my duty to take this underdeveloped little community, however reluctantly, into the modern age. You sophisticated Suburbanites probably can’t imagine that villages like ours still exist: no running water, no electricity and mains gas, no metalled roads, no supermarket or video rental store. But I shall ensure that Gotesdene will very soon be as modern a village as any other in the realm. The centuries have passed Gotesdene by for far too long. I pledge that every home shall have fibreglass cabling, hot and cold running water and a roof. The roads shall have sensory speed detectors, traffic lights and tar macadam. Gotesdene shall be abreast of the world, with television, videophones and computer networking. You probably find it amazing to discover a place so lacking in the basics of modern life.”

“I didn’t expect to find life in Gotesdene *so* very different,” I admitted.

The White Elephant swung his trunk around dramatically, while prudent villagers kept their distance from its range. “Gotesdene has probably not changed in 1500 years. It is a fossil yet to make the transition into the modern era. Almost everyone in the village and the surrounding countryside live off the land, and as they are unable to afford to pay taxes to Her Maphrodite’s government, they provide work in kind to me, the Lord of this Manor. This work provides the surplus wealth - agricultural wealth I admit - which I sell to pay taxes. It’s an arrangement by which we all work together. But I am resolved that Gotesdene shall diversify. Move into microchip manufacture, network services, aerospace and more.

“But great effort is needed to persuade the City to assist. I know that City

financiers and banks are reluctant to invest their capital where there is so little infrastructure, where so few people have the necessary technological and management skills and expertise, and where communications are limited to the speed of an ox-drawn carriage. But this is just City prejudice. Understandable, perhaps, given the vast contrast of culture, but I am convinced that the low-wage opportunities here will eventually persuade the City institutions otherwise.

“I have my own wealth, inherited from centuries of White Elephants here in Gotesdene, and mostly invested in property throughout the realm. I admit it is at least partly my ancestors’ fault that Gotesdene has remained so primitive, by repeatedly opposing any modern developments in or around the village, but the base stupidity of the peasant is to blame as well.” He snorted dismissively, which through a trunk as long as his came out almost as a trumpet call. “Look at them!” he said, waving his trunk about at the villagers, many wearing very ragged clothes secured precariously by cord. “You’d never see such a mean crowd of scum in the Suburbs, would you?”

I shook my head. It is unlikely that a single one of the villagers could stay for very long in the Suburbs before being arrested on charges of vagrancy.

“White Elephants such as I have held the estates here from time immemorial,” he continued. “In that time, we have become increasingly sophisticated. Connoisseurs of art, captains of industry, members of parliament. It is people such as I who have selflessly guided and directed the culture in the nation for the good of the peasant, whose rôle is to support our exalted projects. The long and grand tradition of my family has given communities like this the continuity and stability that it needs. It is only now that it is necessary to force the pace. Make of Gotesdene what it has to be.”

“What plans do you have?”

“I have such plans. Such great plans! I will build factories, power stations, mines and motorways. The primitive waste of this land, dedicated only to inefficient and outmoded methods of agriculture, will be transformed into a landscape of concrete and steel. Tower blocks will replace the mud-huts. Airport runways will crisscross the open fields. A giant shopping mall will be built where this market now stands. I have a vision of industrial estates, tower blocks, factories, flyovers and television aerials! All I need is the investment from the City.”

“Do you work in business yourself?”

“I own many companies in the City and abroad. I own a hotel, a chain of restaurants, several factories and shares in shipping, insurance and defence. But while Her Maphrodite’s government dithers and flounders, I will never get the planning permission I need to modernise Gotesdene. Perhaps after the General Election there will be more decisiveness and direction. And then Gotesdene will no longer be dismissed as a primitive Anglo-Saxon theme park, but will be recognised as a modern, thriving community!”

The White Elephant shook his large ears and I followed him as he strode away from the market through the dusty streets, past obsequious peasants to the stone cross in the common land. We sheltered under the shade of the massive overwhelming oak trees whose bark was protected from vandalism by vicious spikes forced into the trunk. The cross was exquisitely ornate depicting an elephant heroically brandishing a sword in his trunk.

“So, young man, what finds you in our village so far from the Suburbs?” the White Elephant asked.

I told him of my quest for the Truth.

“I believe I should be flattered by the notion that the Truth abides in Gotesdene,” laughed the White Elephant. “I know that many have admired the village, but you are the first to come this way on such a quest. But mayhap in a community such as this, unpolluted by the vices and vagaries of modern irreligious heresy, the Truth you are looking for may indeed be found.”

“The Truth is here! What is it?” I asked enthusiastically.

“The Truth is balance and order. It is respect for the Lord and the world that He has graciously created for us. And that essential Truth is manifest in the elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water. It is these to which the universe is essentially reducible.” The White Elephant waved his trunk around at the village. “Everything here is composed of these Four Elements, myself included. They govern the World physically and spiritually, proportioned by the mystical qualities of numbers. Numbers are the Universe’s abstract foundations. The smaller the Number, the more potent. The number One is the Universe and all in it. Two is the manifest division between the Spiritual and the Material. Three is the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Three is also the number of times which something need be said to be known as the Truth. And Four is the number of the Elements.

“From the Four Elements are derived the Four Humours which govern the Soul of each individual. Just as a person is the physical union of matter, energy, water and oxygen so his Soul is governed by different proportions of the Spiritual Qualities of these Elements. There are, in addition, the Five Senses, the thrice Six which is the Number of the Beast, the Seven Sins, the Twelve Houses of the Heavens and the Twenty-Four Hours of the Day. All in its natural and God-given place in the Universe.

“The Truth is but the balance and order in which God has invested the

Universe, and it is the Duty of all to ensure that this balance is undisturbed by proboscidean, artiodactyl nor human endeavour. Nothing hastens more the Chaos and Destruction of the End than the rejection and perversion of the Natural Order by which the Truth is made manifest.”

“How is the Truth perverted?” I wondered.

“In many ways. By the practice of perversions that transgress the Natural Order such as Sodomy, Heresy and Witchcraft. These must be suppressed with extreme prejudice, or, as surely as Three is the Number of the Lord, the Natural Order will unravel, power will be wrested by foreign despots, laws will be disregarded, monsters will yet again roam the Earth and the Heavens will open!

“The good people of Gotesdene strive hard to keep Satan at bay,” continued the White Elephant indicating the stocks and the gallows with a wave of his trunk. “Here is where transgressors are purged of their sins. And if the Soul is to be purged from the Body to achieve its Salvation, then that is a sacrifice worth making. Gotesdene has a long and proud tradition of suppressing Witchcraft and I speak proudly when I say that no Witch who is accused is ever found other than guilty and punished accordingly. Does this not compare well with the pusillanimity of Justice elsewhere which so frequently permits Witches to wander free spreading their vice, perversion, magic and heterodoxy?”

“How are Witches punished?” I wondered, looking nervously at the scaffold.

“Not all Witches are hanged,” the White Elephant sighed. “For many it is felt that there is opportunity for redemption, and if it be that their confessions of guilt are sufficiently sincere and detailed they may suffer only a whipping or the stocks. This is especially so if they are young and pretty, because if the exterior is fair then the

interior cannot all be rotten. But occasionally a Witch will join the Homosexual, the Murderer or the Heretic on the platform with the noose around the neck. These occasions are a public event, where all can learn from seeing the ignominious end others come to and will reflect on their own transgressions. This is not, I believe, how Justice is conducted in the Suburbs?"

"No," I admitted. "It's a much more complicated procedure - and many of the things you mention are not illegal at all!"

"When the Day of Judgement comes," the White Elephant bellowed, "it will surely visit the most ills on those who treat the Natural Order with not so much contempt as indifference. Much as I admire the progress and order of the Suburbs, there are many features I find alarming. These are so much in conflict with the Truth that I marvel not that you should feel the need to leave the Suburbs to seek the Truth elsewhere. All are treated equally in the Suburbs: Women as equals with Men, the Poor as with the Rich, and the Believer as with the Unbeliever. How can this be right? When God created the Natural Order, He didn't do so only that places such as the Suburbs and the City should disregard it and substitute a New Order of their own invention. When Progress and Modernity are established in Gotesdene, it will not be to subvert the Natural Order, but to reinforce it."

"However," continued the White Elephant reflectively, "the Suburbs have but little sin and vice when compared to the City, where I have been many times and have been many times appalled. From the virtue and decency of the village of Gotesdene, through the indifference to vice and the Truth in the Suburbs, to the depravity and decadence of the City is painted a triptych of the ethics of Heaven, Limbo and Hell. In the City, there is no limit to what is permitted and practised. There are no

moral constraints. No regard for the Natural Order. Indeed, the practice of vice at its most vicious, sin at its most sinful and decadence at its most despicable. Have you ever been to the City?"

"No, not once," I admitted.

"Perhaps, then, there is hope for you yet," snorted the White Elephant. "In the City, there is no likelihood that you will ever find the Truth for which you quest. Indeed, there is complete absence of the Truth. The City is a Hell of fast-moving traffic on many-laned motorways; buildings that scrape the very roof of the sky; frantic and hectic activity; ceaseless noise and light. In all directions the City spreads out, enclosing pockets of green, whereas Gotesdene is a village enclosed by countless green acres. There is nothing but concrete and steel; petrol fumes and neon lights; people coming and people going. Not, as in Gotesdene, merely being: they restlessly move from one place to another. And so many of them!"

"The City is very big, is it?"

"It is tall. It is wide. It houses many millions. It is the economic, financial, political, social and cultural capital of this land, and also the nation's whorehouse, bordello and opium den. It is also very expensive. In Gotesdene, the possessor of a guinea is a rich man. He has enough to live for a long time on one single guinea, which composes two hundred and fifty-two pennies! A fortune! That is over a thousand farthings! In the City, a guinea is but what a farthing is here. Perhaps less! But despite the expense and the hideous environment and the loathsome depravity, despite all this, many millions choose to live in and amongst its garbage and degeneracy."

"You don't recommend that I ever visit the City?"

“No. Not if you value your Soul!” the White Elephant said emphatically. “In the City, there is all the depravity and decline which will surely hasten the Day of Judgment. The City is like a cancer infesting this land. The City congests its inhabitants into smaller and less congenial spaces, spreads pollution into the air, the street, the water supply and the ether, exhausting the atmosphere, the soil, the reservoir and the power station. Worse than its physical despoliation, is its spiritual barrenness and pollution. It spreads prostitution, pornography, atheism, sexual perversity and a cult of instant gratification. And this is what is most despicable in the City and what it represents. Gotesdene will not be so corrupted as it pursues the path of Progress that I have planned for it. It will forever remain a bastion of virtue, faith and, yea, the Truth!”

The White Elephant paused in his tirade and looked about him at the village. His great claims for it did not seem particularly well illustrated by the general atmosphere of poverty and decay. A peasant was urinating against a tree. Several goats were plaintively bleating for alms around a pottery saucer. One goat had both rear legs missing and one eye. The ground was dusty and barren, dotted occasionally by piles of ox dung and attendant flies.

“I have much business to which I must attend,” the White Elephant announced. “I shall leave you now. But I hope that as you stay here you will reflect on all that I have said and focus anew your quest for the Truth.”

With that he bade me farewell, and walked away from the village green, his cloak raising a cloud of dust behind him, responding with a gracious wave of his trunk to the obsequies of the villagers who stood aside for him.

A passing goat was selling meat pies which looked quite unappetising, but my

hunger resolved that I off-load some of the farthings I had accumulated for a pie that was fortunately cool enough for me to eat with my fingers. I sat down at the base of the stone cross with my feet resting in dried mud and decomposing faeces. I passively observed the bustle of the village, still slightly nauseated by the dirt and decay.

While chewing on a particularly unforgiving piece of unidentifiable meat, I noticed some men and women wearing unsophisticated flaxen clothes roughly push a woman towards the common. They headed towards the stocks, shouting and jeering at the woman as they proceeded. She was punched and kicked and some of her clothes had been ripped off. She seemed resigned to her misfortune and didn't struggle, but from the evidence of the bruises on her face and her bare arms and shoulders, she'd probably lost all the resistance she'd ever had. The stocks were opened, her head, hands and legs were pushed through, and then they were clamped shut. She sat in a very undignified position, with only the dusty ground on which to rest her bottom. The men forcing her in secured the stocks with a peg through the hole by the side.

Her punishment wasn't over then, as the group of men and women continued jeering at her, and threw earth and moist cow-pats at her. One or two children even threw stones - one catching her on the cheek and immediately opened a bloody gash. An ox passing by did a very good trade in the fruit he was selling, which judging from the messy way it splattered as it hit her was less than fresh and firm. I had never seen justice dispensed like this in the Suburbs, where punishment was generally either monetary or concealed in penal institutions. I felt uneasy about the unbridled enthusiasm with which this rough justice was dealt.

"Poor girl!" commented a voice next to me. "Even if she is a witch, I'm certain she doesn't deserve what she's getting."

I turned my head away from the action to look straight into the eyes of a horse. At least, I initially thought it was a horse, judging from his muzzle, but he had a graceful white body with delicate cloven feet, a long sinuous tail and a single golden horn rising from his forehead. After encountering so many singular individuals today, encountering a Unicorn didn't appear so strange. But I'd always believed that Unicorns no longer existed.

This Unicorn was by no means extinct. He shook his golden mane and whinnied slightly. "It may be she is a witch. But if she is, there's not a great deal to show of her sorcery. I'd always thought she was more a veterinary surgeon, from the evidence of her care for pets and farm workers, but the good people of Gotesdene have clearly judged her guilty. Not that I'm at all sure what's wrong with witchcraft, despite the fact that in my several millennia I've not seen much to convince me that it ever actually works. Still, she's lucky in a way! If you'd been here a few days ago, you'd have seen the still decaying corpse of another convicted witch hanging from the gallows."

"How dreadful!" I exclaimed. "What happened to her?"

"Well, eventually the maggots, or whatever it is that eats decaying bodies, had loosened her neck sufficiently so that it snapped. Then her head fell off where it cracked open and rolled towards the oak trees. Her body just dropped down in a heap where the dogs straightaway pounced on her rancid flesh. It wasn't a pleasant sight!"

"I'm sure it wasn't," I agreed, still in awe of the Unicorn whose long tail gracefully looped round and with great accuracy snapped like a whipcord at the many flies showing interest in his rump. "Why don't people in Gotesdene like witches?"

"To say I don't know would be a lie. I've lived too long and in too many

communities not to understand how people everywhere feel the need to find victims in their midst. Communists, Homosexuals, Jews, Cats, Pakistanis, Goats, Cockatrices, - they've all been victimised at one time or another. I suppose I should consider myself rather lucky that unicorns have never really been disliked by anyone. People in Gotesdene are very set in their ways, and anyone whose behaviour or attitude seems a bit odd or unusual means that they will almost certainly be accused of Sodomy or Witchcraft. And sometimes both at the same time. Which I suppose is just about feasible.

“But I make a point of coming to Gotesdene every now and then. I'm very popular with the villagers. There just doesn't seem to be anything that I can't do as far as they're concerned. They probably think I can vault tall buildings or stop speeding express trains. They certainly believe I can do wonders for impotence and gonorrhoea. Absolute nonsense, of course. But it's probably not so unusual to find someone like me in a place like Gotesdene. What is bizarre is that someone like you should be. Are you from the City?”

“No. The Suburbs,” I admitted. “Indeed, I've never even visited the City!”

“Really, that *does* seem curious to me! But then I've never been to the Suburbs, although I've been to the City many times. Very many times. It's changed so much over the centuries: you wouldn't believe! I recall when it wasn't any bigger than Gotesdene here. In fact, I can remember when the modern-day Gotesdene villagers would seem positive sophisticates. In those days, people used to think I could cure them of laryngitis, leprosy or haemophilia just by touching them with my horn. It didn't matter how many people I'd touch with my horn who didn't get in the slightest bit better, my reputation didn't suffer at all. Often tales of the medical achievements I'd

made without the slightest recourse to surgery or antibiotics preceded me and I was well fêted wherever I went. In a way, those were good days, but I like to keep a lower profile nowadays. I don't like the way some people think they might solve the mystery as to how I've achieved so many miracles by dissecting me. I'd rather remain a mystery and alive."

The Unicorn shook his head sadly and blew agitatedly through his wide nostrils. "I like the City. If I were you, I'd make a point of visiting it some time. You can't hope to understand the world today without seeing the City. It's the exact opposite to here. In Gotesdene (bless it!) there really is *nothing* of any great interest, although I imagine its modernising mayor might think differently. In the City is literally everything of interest. The reason people want to escape from the City is not so much for what they are running towards, but from the tremendous bewilderment they're running away from."

"It sounds very forbidding."

"I daresay it does. And the first time one is there, one is astonished by how very busy it is. Everyone is rushing around from place to place. The City is alive all day and all night. In fact it's a cliché to say the City never sleeps, but it never does. Quite unlike Gotesdene which you could say could hardly be described as even fully awake.

"I'm forever astounded at how the City continues to grow and expand over the centuries. I've often thought: this is it! It can never get busier, or wealthier, or more crowded, or the buildings any taller. I've often thought that I was privileged to see the City at the pinnacle of its history, only to see yet again how mistaken I was. But then I have a very unusual perspective, having lived for such a very long time."

"How long have you lived?"

“I’m sure it’s still considered rude in some cultures to discuss age,” laughed the Unicorn. He shook his head with a rough snort through his nostrils, while a couple of oxen passed by chatting and laughing as they went. One of them shyly signalled to the Unicorn with his tail, and then returned to his conversation. “I am, as it happens rather more than two thousand years, probably close to three thousand. Quite a great age by your standards I imagine, but not at all unusual for Unicorns. I suppose we make up in number of years for what we lack in number of individuals.”

I was quite astonished. This degree of longevity was extremely rare in the Suburbs. Indeed, as I reflected, the Suburbs, despite its apparent timelessness, probably didn’t exist as such when the Unicorn was born. “You must have seen and done an astonishing number of things in your life.”

“I have that,” he laughed good-naturedly. “I’ve been to almost every corner of the globe at one time or another. I’ve had the luxury of enough time to spend what you might call a lifetime in rather a few of these places. I’ve been the companion of royalty: quite a few princesses have felt strangely enamoured towards me, but I’ve successfully resisted any indecent advances. Perhaps it’s the Unicorn’s very ability to resist such temptation, that’s kept our numbers down, but like the manticore and the chimera I have great reasons to suspect the propriety of some of my ancestors.” He glanced down at the cloven hoof at the end of his slender deer-like legs. “I really am such a curious mixture of things. It’s difficult to imagine how anyone could ever have conceived of someone like me!”

“What places have you visited?” I wondered, hoping that perhaps he might give me some insight as to where I might find the Truth.

“Oh, so many places! Islands inhabited by moas, dodos and æpyornises. Plains

full of quaggas and aurochs. Forests of giant lemurs, pygmy elephants and ground sloths. Seas full of great whales, giant auks and dugongs. Countries where people are sacrificed to the sun, nations which randomly enslave more than a tenth of their own people and work them until they die, and nations dedicated entirely to the pursuit of pleasure. I much prefer the last ones. I've been the guest of chancellors, viziers, cæsars, walis and prime ministers. I've met some of the most famous people in all history. In fact, I've had one of the most rich and fulfilling lives you can imagine!"

"How do you manage to afford all this?"

"It's amazing how much a small investment can accumulate over a few centuries, let alone a few millennia. I've always been very careful to invest wisely, although I've lost a several fortunes in my time! The cumulative gain on capital over that time, with quite a respectable long term growth rate, particularly accelerated over recent centuries, has made me altogether immoderately rich."

The Unicorn turned his head round to look sympathetically at the witch in the stocks. Nobody was throwing anything at her now, but the face, arms and legs protruding through the stocks were covered in a mess of blood, vegetables and rotten fruit. Her head was dangling to one side, eyes bruised and swollen, and her hair tangled in the mess adhering to it. The Unicorn turned his head back to me, raising his eyebrows sadly while slowly shaking his head to one side.

"Wherever I go," he said resignedly, "there is always cruelty and injustice. As you can see, Gotesdene is no different!"

"So, tell me about the Suburbs," asked the Unicorn, concentrating his gaze at me. "It's very different from here, isn't it?"

"Very much so," I agreed. "People live in much nicer houses, wear much better

made clothes and the streets are much cleaner. There are wastepaper bins on alternate lampposts where people throw their litter, so there isn't nearly as much filth. There are electric lighting, motor cars and no goats and oxen wandering around."

"It sounds almost sterile..."

"Yes, it's very clean and tidy," I agreed.

"I can see that can be viewed as a great asset," mused the Unicorn. "I've heard that it doesn't contain quite the variety and spread of individuals as even places like this. And it also has no witches, I suppose?"

"None that I've ever heard of. And no Unicorns or White Elephants either!"

"So, why then have you left a place of such great material comfort and apparent orderliness for a place like this?"

I then told the Unicorn of my search for the Truth, which had only so far led me by train to the village of Gotesdene.

"I can assure you that if the Truth exists in Gotesdene, it's eluded me!" the Unicorn laughed. "Did you seriously think you might find it here?"

"I was sure I couldn't find it in the Suburbs. The White Elephant said that the Truth was revealed in numerology and the four elements."

"You've spoken to the mayor, have you? I imagine he *would* think that the Truth was something that could be reduced to a simple set of axioms. It seems to me that if that were the case, then such views would never have been modified and certainly never discarded, as they mostly have been, in favour of science and logic. I'd have thought that the Truth would be more obviously self-evident than that!"

"Do you know where I might find the Truth?"

"Goodness me!" laughed the Unicorn shaking his muzzle from side to side, his

long horn narrowly avoiding grazing me. “I may have lived a long time and gained a great deal of wisdom in that time. I may have done many things, met many people and seen many places. But I am not one who has ever found the Truth. If I had, I daresay I might truly possess all the healing powers attributed to me. No! The Truth is as much a mystery to me as it quite evidently is to you. But you aren’t the first person I’ve ever met on a quest for the Truth, but known by completely different names.”

“Have any of these people ever found the Truth, do you know?”

“Well, many of them have found something, and sometimes it’s been what they were looking for, but I don’t believe that what they’d found constitutes what you might call the Truth. Quite often they’ve had to slay dragons, fight monsters and do some quite gruesome things to get whatever it was, but the rewards of their quest never seem to have changed the world appreciably for the better. However, don’t be too downhearted. There’s no particular reason, I imagine, why you need not be successful where others have failed.”

“Do you have any advice as to where I should look?”

The Unicorn raised his muzzle and looked up at the mid-afternoon sun and the oak-leaves rustling in the light breeze. He then lowered his head, kicked a cloven foot on the dry earth raising a small cloud of orange dust, and whinnied again. “Not in Gotesdene. In fact, I’d advise you to leave Gotesdene before nightfall. There’s no hostelry of any description where you would be welcomed to stay and it’s quite likely that one of the villagers might get the idea that because you’re a stranger to the village, you must therefore be a witch...”

“They wouldn’t think that, would they?”

“Even if they didn’t, they may not be particularly sympathetic to someone who

dresses and behaves so very unlike themselves. If I were you, I'd look for a different place to stay for the night."

"But where could I go?" I wondered, having rather hoped that I could stay at a motel or bed-and-breakfast in the village.

"There are other towns and villages around here. I don't know how far you'd have to walk, but I'm sure you'll find one soon. Some are likely to be a great deal more to your taste than this Anglo-Saxon relic. There's a religious community near here. I don't know anything about it, but monks have been famous for their hospitality throughout history."

The Unicorn looked towards the distance and saw a gathering of people around the White Elephant near the market stalls. "I think my presence may be required," he commented. He raised a hoof and gently pawed my leg. He wished me luck in my quest and then strode unhurriedly towards the White Elephant, his leonine tail raised high above his head. As he passed by the villagers, they bowed their heads deferentially to him, which he acknowledged with a nod of his head and a gesture of his tail.

I lingered by the stone cross and pondered the Unicorn's advice. As my eyes wandered about the village and focused on the unfortunate and now unconscious figure of the witch, I decided that although his wisdom might not encompass the Truth, his advice to leave should not be disregarded.

I stood up and strode cautiously across the common land and through the village gates. The road outside wound off in one direction towards the station and in the other towards unfamiliar destinations listed by a wooden signpost. I had some difficulty deciphering the names from the peculiar runic characters. It was probably not going to take me any nearer to the Truth to go back where I'd come from, so I

decided to advance in the opposite direction. I threw the last of my farthings at some very grateful peasants and while they squabbled over them, I headed off alongside the unenclosed fields towards the sun's afternoon aurora.

4

Dark shadows from lush foliage fringed the road leading from the farmland of Gotesdene to a district where only the occasional tethered ox enlivened the orderly, monotonous rows of vegetable and root crops. These were regimented by an unending line of posts supporting barbed wire fences. At regular intervals signs warned me not to leave the path nor to appropriate what was not mine. At one stage, I observed a very despondent merman tethered just like the oxen, with a sign hanging round his neck and a black hood covering his face and head. He was too far away across the fields for me to decipher the writing on the sign.

The flat, grey paving stones of the road were undeniably better maintained than before, as also was the lethal barbed wire supported by posts in the grey earth, which had caught and killed the odd unfortunate song bird. It was getting late in the afternoon, but, as everywhere was so dark and grey, it seemed much later although the sky was no less blue nor the sun less golden. It was ominously quiet. There were no song birds and the only sound was the gentle rustle of a light breeze through the stiff orderly lines of cabbages, swedes and turnips.

Initially, I welcomed this tidier, more orderly, environment. It had evoked the care and attention I was accustomed to in the Suburbs, rather than the dirt and decay I had so recently left. However, after a few miles, I hankered for a break in the monotony or just the sight of other people. I had the distinct feeling that I was trespassing, although I'd seen no signs warning me off private property or informing me that I would be prosecuted.

After more than an hour of walking between the barbed wire and the infrequent dark shadowy tree, I came in sight of a large sign under which sat a hunched figure wearing a long black gown and a tall black hat. The sign informed me that I was in **The Borough of Divinity** and underneath was copious small writing that I couldn't decipher until I came fairly close. It was a list of rules and regulations pertaining to the borough. Just behind the dark figure was a signpost which pointed in four directions ahead - two indicating **Divinity** that were nonetheless in opposite directions, one which read **The Delta** and the fourth which pointed to **Endon**.

As I approached, the figure in the cloak scrutinised me silently and curiously, while I debated which of these four directions I should take. He was small and thin and his head was shaven. He turned to stare at me, but made no attempt to acknowledge my presence.

"Excuse me," I ventured after a while. "Where would you recommend I go?"

The figure cleared his throat, apparently resenting being addressed. After a moment of uneasy deliberation, he informed me that one direction led to the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ**, which was the true and rightful administrator of the **Borough of Divinity**. The other direction, misleadingly also known as 'Divinity', was the heretical **Parish of the Divinity of Christ the Lord**. The borough, especially that part under the jurisdiction of the **Holy Parish**, was one which took true and un sinful pride in its status as a truly **Holy** borough in which the **Word of the Son, the Father and the Holy Ghost** was maintained as law and guiding principle. It was a district that welcomed with open arms all right-thinking people who honestly practised the precepts of the **Holy and Sacred Scriptures**, and who had surrendered their will and worldly goods to the greater good of the **One True Religion of Jesus Christ Our**

Lord.

He didn't know from his brief acquaintance of me whether I were a Christian: one who followed the dictates of **Our Saviour** and not the heretical opinions of the Pope, the AntiChrist or the Devil (who are but one in their sin and heresy). Only a true Christian, however, would be welcome within the walls of the **Holy Parish**. His opinion at seeing my uncovered head and hands (he sniffed disapprovingly) was that I was no Christian; at least not a Christian who followed the true **Word of the Lord** as faithfully practised by the good Christian people of the **Holy Parish**. Even those of the misguided and despicable **Parish of the Divinity of Christ the Lord** covered these extremities and purged their scalp of the vanity of hair. If I were to have any likelihood of entering the **Holy Parish** I would be obliged to at least cover my hair with a hat, several of which were provided, with accompanying gowns, in a chest by his side, for strangers such as I. He advised me to cover myself without delay if I were to stay any longer within the borough.

I decided it was advisable to heed the pious gentleman, and selected a tall hat large enough to cover all my hair and a long black gown that shrouded me almost to my feet. While I was dressing, the gentleman commented that I must be speculating why a devout Christian such as he was sitting alone outside the walls of the Parish, when all good Christians were at prayer or devotion secure within the welcoming confines of the Chapel and not out in the open air, imperilled by temptation and sin.

He explained that he was indefinitely exiled from the Parish for committing the unforgivable and irredeemable sins of garrulity, irreverent laughter, vile thoughts and oversleeping. Sins for which he was pleased to do penance, awaiting a decision from the Priests of the **Holy Parish**, and the **Lord God Our Maker** who guides their

deliberations, that he had atoned for his sins and could be rehabilitated into the community. In the meantime, he was to spend his days working on the fields with his comrades - never to utter one word to them on pain of more severe punishment - and his nights here, at the foot of the sign, in contemplation of the great mercy and goodness of **Our Father Who Art in Heaven**. When not praying, he would recite approved texts from the **Holy Scriptures** and flagellate himself with the barbed wire provided. In this way **God the Most Wise and Merciful** would see the sincerity of his penance and the degree to which he atoned for his transgressions.

The practices of the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ** were inspired by the classical wisdom of the great prophet, **Saint Isaac Newton**, who in his religious and secular writings had divined the profoundest depths and meanings of the Christian faith as it should be practised. A faith that had strayed too far over the centuries from the original fundamental tenets preached by **Jesus Christ and His Apostles** under the lax and heretical doctrine of the Papists, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Baptists, the Quakers, the Anabaptists, the Mormons and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. A faith which had schismed so many times that it was only in the pure unadulterated vision of the **Great Saint**, who had divined the **Noble Principles** of Force and Motion, that it had regained the clarity and purity of **Our Saviour's** Own Truth.

There are **Four Pillars** of the Faith practised by Deists, as the good Christians of the **Holy Parish** are known by others blinkered by liberal ungodly interpretations of the **Holy Scriptures**. The **First Pillar** (1) is that of **Unquestioning Faith**. Man was not created by **God** to question His Laws or His Desires. What is Good is what the Lord dictates. What He wishes must be Good, because all that is Good is also the Wish of God. It is a Sin to question the Letter of **Holy Writ**, to even suggest that there may

be error, misinterpretation or inconsistency. It is a Sin to even hint that one quarter of one word of the Law as interpreted by the Priests of the **Holy Parish** is anything but the complete and accurate precept of **God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost**.

Together with **Unquestioning Faith** is the **Second Pillar (2)** which is the **Absolute Observation of Ritual**. When **Jesus Christ** commanded Christians to pray at regular and frequent times of the day, to Labour not on the seventh day - the Day of Creation - and to attend Church regularly to voice praise, these were not meant as options for Christians to follow. Rather, as an ox must be tethered to prevent its escape, so too must Christians be tethered to the **Rituals** that characterise the **One and Only True Church**.

The **Third Pillar (3)** is that of a **Rejection of Material Values**. Material possessions and the means of measuring them in groats, shillings or florins were forbidden in the **Holy Parish**. A Good Christian must follow the example of **Our Saviour** who had no possessions of His own, as they were held entirely by the Church and in turn by **God the Father**. A Christian Man must not own his own ox, woman or slave. Possession is clearly the begetter of the Sins of Avarice and Greed, which along with the Five others (especially Lust), must be extirpated forever if Satan and his hounds of Hell are to be held at bay.

Not only must Material Values be rejected, but there must be conformance to the **Fourth Pillar (4)** which is **Rejection of Spiritual Corruption**. Satan is everywhere, ready to corrupt the Good Christian Soul as he endeavoured so unsuccessfully with **Our Saviour**. Nobody can hope to withstand the Temptations of the Devil as well as **Our Lord Jesus Christ**, so it is an Eternal Unceasing Struggle. **Spiritual Corruption** is the deadliest and most difficult of the Evils to ward off. It can

lead to Atheism, Agnosticism or Heresy. Doubts as to the Perfection of Creation. Philosophical debate on the nature of Morality and Knowledge. Non-acceptance of class, status, race or gender, and one's own position in the **Hierarchy of Creation**, a Hierarchy headed by the Priests and **Angels**, under which, in descending order, are Men, Women, Negroes, Animals, Monsters, Demons and Cats. All such propositions are diabolic, and only an unflinching and Total rejection of such luxurious unGodly doubts and discussion can be tolerated by the Good Christian.

I wasn't convinced that I wanted to visit either of the Parishes of Divinity, so I asked the Exile if he could tell me about the other two destinations indicated by the signpost. He assured me that his knowledge of them was not based on personal experience, for he knew better than to risk Eternal Damnation by visiting known refuges of the Devil, but what he knew convinced him that it was better for all men, and not just Christians, to forsake these districts. In comparison to these, even the heretical Parish of the Divinity of Christ the Lord was to be preferred.

In one direction was the Insect City of Endon which must forever be Damned for four reasons that were as follows. The First Reason (and one which alone must surely give me pause to think) is that the inhabitants are not Human and therefore have no hope of Salvation. No Animal can be Blessed - and for that reason no Animal is permitted into the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ**. The oxen who labour on the fields are permitted outside its walls, but never within, only insofar as they must never speak a word on pain of death and must only be seen as Beasts of Burden, for which all Animals were Created by **Our Maker**.

The inhabitants of Endon are all insects - and such insects! Many as tall as a Man, if not taller, and pretend to Rights and Privileges which no Animal, nor even a

Woman, would be permitted in Divinity. Even insects of more moderate proportions were not permitted within the Borough of Divinity: a partly inconvenient principle in that the fertilisation of all flowering crops had to be done by artificial means, but one which denied the Parishioners of much disease and all pestilence.

The Second Reason is that the inhabitants do not recognise the Primacy of the **One True Faith** as practised in the **Holy Parish**. There are Insects who claim to be Christians, but how can this be when they deny the superiority of Man over Arthropods or indeed any other Animal? It is true that the Borough of Divinity is a tiny island of Sanity and Virtue amidst an ocean of heresy, blasphemy and apathy, and in that regard the City of Endon is no worse than the Suburbs, Lambdeth, Delta or elsewhere; but it is no less the Damned for that.

The Third Reason is the Licentiousness of the inhabitants. They indulge in physical procreation, to read literature and view pictures not imbued with the Spirit or Word of **Our Saviour**, to freely express opinions contrary to that of the Christian Faith and to draw no ethical distinctions between race and species. Females are known to wander free, attracting lascivious and unholy thoughts. There is little or no public observance of Christian Ritual. There are private ownership, public vice and no respect for betters and elders. Sin is rife, in all its Seven forms.

The Fourth Reason is that the Borough of Endon is Doomed, and it was not necessary to wait for the Second Coming for me to see this happen. The Good Christians of the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ** would soon extend its boundaries to enclose the territory of this great subterranean City and in the process would purge it of the last of these oversized Insects; and the Spiders, Centipedes, Wood-Lice, Worms and Silver Fish that also live there. The City of Endon would

become a mirror of Divinity itself: no longer a haven for Godless Arthropods. The cinemas, brothels and video arcades would be replaced by Chapels at which Men could pray to **Our Lord** for forgiveness for our Sins and for the elimination of Godless Exoskeletal Execrations.

In the other direction is the equally damned Delta where the Borough of Divinity meets the Sea. This is another Godless district inhabited by merpeople and water buffalo. The merpeople are as damned as the Arthropods of Endon, for they are, in addition, cruel satiric jokes created by Satan who has taken the Holy and Sacred Image of **Our Lord**, in whose likeness Men are made, and replaced the lower limbs with the tail of a fish, a form of life lower than even an ox. These deformed people live wholly in the saline and estuarine waters of the Delta, where they can breathe freely both under and over water, and wear no clothes. This naked flesh invites Lust, that most base of Sins: the mere entertainment of which is a capital offence in the **Holy Parish**.

I expressed concern at the harshness in which nonbelievers and animals were treated by the people of Divinity. The Exile responded with anger. He advised me that it was imperative for all Good Christians to purge the World of Godlessness and Sin. And part of that imperative is to forcefully convert all nonbelievers, under threat of capital punishment if necessary. Animals, who have no Soul, and therefore no chance of the **Life Everlasting**, should be purged without recourse to appeal. For what value is there in a being without Soul?

In the World of nonbelievers, there is a hierarchy of apostasy. Vile though the Dieuists of the heretical **Parish of the Divinity of Christ the Lord** may be, they are nearer to the One True Faith in that they departed from its basic tenets in only recent

centuries. And this is why the greatest effort of the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ** has been towards the forcible conversion and Spiritual Salvation of these most hated of reprobates. These Dieuists dissented from the Doctrine as prescribed by the **Prophet Saint Isaac** and follow instead the heresy of the Apostate Rénè Descartes. May he be Forever Damned and his sufferings especially intense! To people beyond the Borough of Divinity, it may appear that there is little difference between the practices of Good Christians and Dieuists. They lead a similarly austere way of life, but unlike Good Christians, they place significantly less weight on the Natural Order as manifest by the Laws of Force and Motion. Instead, they attach greater significance to the Dual Identity of Mind and Body, believing that the Soul rests in the Pituitary Gland and that the Laws of Classical Physics have only passing relevance to the worship of **the Holy Trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost**.

None of the destinations seemed wholly welcoming, and as it would soon be dusk, I thought it best to head to the nearest, whether it was a religious parish, a delta or a city of giant insects. The Exile advised me that the **Holy Parish** was by far the nearest, being less than four furlongs distant, but he was sceptical about advising one of such dubious character as I to sojourn at a Parish of such great virtue. He also advised me that I may not be alone in my journey as another - a woman, he admitted with some loathing, - had also passed by in that direction. He hoped that I would not sully my slim chance of Salvation by looking at, or, worse, speaking with this Temptress of Adam. I assured him that I would do my best to keep my Soul intact and followed the unswerving, grey paved path towards this one of the two Divinities.

As I walked along, I pondered the Exile's reference to a woman preceding me on this route. It wasn't long until I came upon a figure huddled up in a long black

gown under the dark shadow of a broad-leafed tree whom I assumed to be a Priest. As I came closer I realised that this must be the woman I'd been warned to avoid. My steps on the hard paving stones attracted her attention. She raised her head and I could see that her skin was black and her hair was beaded. I was sure I recognised her.

"What the blinking heck are *you* doing here?" she exclaimed. "It's a flipping long way from the blooming Suburbs!" It was Anna, whom I'd met the day before.

"I'm just looking for somewhere to stay the night." I noticed acute misery in her previously self-confident face. Her eyes had lost their liveliness: evidence that she may have been crying. She didn't stand up, so I crouched down beside her at the foot of the tree. "What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for somewhere to stay as well," she sniffed. "I left the Suburbs yesterday and went by coach to the Delta which I thought would be jolly interesting. Well, a lot more flipping interesting than the blinking Suburbs, I reckoned. And I suppose the Delta *is* a lot more interesting: but it's really just a place where merpeople live. You can't see much of them, of course, as they mostly live underwater. All you *can* see is the odd merman or mermaid sunning him or her self by the water's edge or on a rock. There's a shop where you can buy souvenirs of your visit to the Delta and a café where you can sit and watch them frolic around in the water with sea-cows and dolphins. To be honest, though, when you've seen one merperson - and they're fairly common sights in some places - then you've seen them all.

"There's nowhere to stay in the Delta. Not unless you can breathe underwater, so I thought I'd come to stay the night in a motel or pub in this borough. I'd been told that Divinity was a rather peculiar place, where you had to cover yourself up like this..." She indicated with her hand the long gown that covered most of her body, and

then tugged at the hood which would have totally hidden her face if she'd put it up. "I got all this gear from the souvenir shop in Delta when I'd been told what I'd have to wear. I suppose it was meant as a souvenir of Delta's neighbouring borough. It was jolly cheap - less than half a crown! But I'll be blinking well glad when I can take it off. It's really heavy and constricting."

I felt the same about the gown I'd put on. "Didn't you find anywhere to stay?"

"No chance! I thought these people being Christians and everything would at least have some kind of stable or something for me to stay in, but I don't think I've *ever* been to a less welcoming place. If this is what Jesus Christ is all about, I'm flipping glad I'm not a practising Christian! When I got to that crossroads back there - you must've passed it! - the chap there didn't even look at me, let alone say anything. He kept turning his head away as if I were the flipping Medusa or something. But I went this way because I was sure it's nearer to this Divinity - (Did you notice there are two of them? Weird!) - than anywhere else. So I arrived at the Parish - and it's all surrounded by this high dark wall - and outside I found this bell you pull, so I pulled it. Then I stood back waiting for an answer. There wasn't one, so I tried again, only more persistently and louder.

"Then this pamphlet suddenly appeared through a kind of letterbox in the door. Look at it!" She proffered a folded piece of paper covered in quite dense script with the heading `On The Reason why women and Negroes are Eternally Damned and Therefore Unwelcome in the Holy Parish of Divinity`. "I stood around to read the pamphlet, thinking that perhaps if I waited long enough, someone would let me in and tell me it was all just a tasteless joke. However all that happened was that I heard a sort of thud as something hit the ground beside me. I turned round

to see what it was, only to hear something else hit the ground. And then another thud. It suddenly dawned on me that the good people of Divinity were throwing stones at me, so I turned round and ran and ran. And then I stopped by this tree where I read this revolting pamphlet. It really is flipping dreadful!”

“What does it say?”

“Well, it doesn’t distinguish between being a woman and being black. They’re both equally damned. It seems that if you’re either, you’re some kind of subhuman. I mean, how’s that supposed to make *me* feel? There are four reasons why I’m damned which they’ve got here in four helpful sections. There are scriptural reasons, and there are a whole load of quotations from the Bible about Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, and Sodom and Gomorrah. I don’t know what all that’s supposed to prove, but it seems pretty jolly conclusive here. The second reason is that apparently women and Negroes have been scientifically proven to be inferior. In fact, that’s the exact wording... “scientifically proven to be inferior in every detail to Man, created in the image of the Lord”. I can’t quite make out what all this stuff is meant to prove, but it doesn’t convince me. Then in this third section, there are loads of historical reasons why the ‘True Faith’ has only ever been revealed to Caucasoid Men, and that no one of any other ethnic background gets a flipping look in - and especially no women. And then, when you’d’ve thought that three reasons were enough, there’s a fourth one where it talks of all the sins that women and Negroes are supposed to have committed. It doesn’t exactly sound like a litany of damnation to me, but it seems these Deists have pretty high standards. You just can’t have a laugh or a good time with this lot!”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I’ll just sit here I suppose. I don’t want to go wandering about in the dark by myself. I had this friend I’d been travelling with, but he’s gone off by bus somewhere. He was a Cat, quite a decent sort, - not one of those who keep going on about how badly History has treated them! He’s much more interested in natural living and organic farming and that kind of stuff. And he certainly didn’t want to come here. Good thing too! If they throw stones at me, just imagine what they’d do if they saw a Cat inside their precious borough. They’d skin him alive. Or crucify him!”

I stood up, leaving Anna still incredulously studying her pamphlet, and walked through the encroaching dusk towards the Holy Parish, the high walls of which I spotted at the end of the unflinchingly straight path, striped by the posts’ long shadows.

The Holy Parish certainly did not seem very welcoming when I stopped below its forbidding high grey stone walls, by a large grey oak door with monstrous black metal hinges. The precipitous walls rose imposingly from the end of the path. It was very quiet. Much quieter than I was accustomed to in the Suburbs, with not even the distant roar of aeroplanes or road traffic. It was difficult to believe that a community lived, worked and, presumably, slept inside those walls.

I broke the silence as I hammered on the door to attract attention. There was no response. I waited a few moments, then hammered again: the echoes of the heavy knocker perturbing the silent dusk. Again there was no response, so I turned back. However, as I walked into the gloom I turned my head round to see a silhouette entirely covered in a gown and hood. I wandered back to what must be one of the Priests of the Holy Parish.

I could see nothing of his face beneath his hood, but when he spoke his voice reverberated with authority, with a curious tendency to start off loud and to finish each of his long sentences in a quieter voice than he'd begun. He asked me first of all if I were associated with the Negro woman who had so recently called, for if I were he knew that I deserved at best pity and at most Eternal Damnation for my sinful acquaintance. Women were damnable afterthoughts of the **Creator**, whose sole purpose was to maintain the essential generation of Man, created in the image of **Our Maker**, but who had betrayed even this humble duty by the Sin of Curiosity in the Garden of Eden.

In the **Holy Parish of Divinity**, in keeping with the Divine Wishes of **God**, Women were kept totally separate from Men and from each other. They were not to be seen by Men at any stage in their damnable lives for fear they should arouse that most base of Sins, that of Lust, which made Man no better than Animals, below which there were few orders of Creation of lower regard. The rôle of Woman, as prescribed in the Divine Command **To Go Forth and Multiply** was entirely for procreation, and for which the act of Sex (intimately associated as it is with the basest of Sins) had been proscribed, and, using scientific principles inspired by the Great Prophet **Saint Isaac Newton**, the necessary task of procreation was now performed by artificial insemination: a process which was sometimes fatal by virtue of how it had to take place in total darkness and without bodily contact. But this sacrifice of the potential Whore was far preferable to the loss of a Good Christian's Soul. To prevent the Woman corrupting the Virtue of the Child, the Mother was necessarily separated from their progeny who are inculcated in Good Christian Values by the Priests, unless, God Forbid, the Child were of the Lesser Gender, in which case more than the bare

minimum of instruction in the Holy Scripture was both a luxury and a grave danger to the Social Order. In short, in the Holy Parish, Women were not permitted to be spoken to or heard from, seen or to be seen. This is how it should be and how it should forever be.

The Priest stated his opinion that the only reason I could have for venturing into the Borough of Divinity must be to seek accommodation for the night, but that for even the briefest of residencies, it was necessary to be sure that my presence would in no way corrupt the Godly and Righteous ambience of the Holy Parish of Divinity. He needed to know first of all if I were a Foreigner, because all those from foreign parts were necessarily Sinners, as it was widely known, and said frequently in the **Holy Scriptures**, that Sin was Abroad. I reassured him that I was not a Foreigner, and not even of Foreign birth. The Priest was much relieved, because he would not wish a Foreign Language or a Foreign Culture, especially one of an atheistic or heterodox kind, to be expressed within the confines of the **Holy Parish**.

The **Holy Scriptures** often damned foreigners, such as Philistines, Romans and Egyptians, who had so often brought misery to the Chosen People, who are those who follow the **One True Faith**. Some foreigners were much more to be feared than others, in particular Cats, who were nothing more than the Children and Representatives of Satan. Not only are Cats Animals, lower than Women or Negroes, but they are fundamentally damned for their close association with Satan and Witchcraft (the Devil's magic), for which they had been rightfully punished, purged and exterminated since time immemorial. The **Holy Scriptures** hold Cats in the Greatest Abhorrence, an assertion for which the Priest provided no Scriptural evidence.

All Animals are no better than slaves for Man, for whom they were created and by whom they were named. Those Animals such as the ox have a privileged rôle of servitude, for which they can be spared for as long as they are willing and able to faithfully serve. Other Animals have no such privileges, and should be exterminated with extreme prejudice. The Cat is the worst in the way that Satan's servants have inveigled their way into the homes and by the very hearths of Man, seducing Man with their lustful ways and their desire for food and comfort. All Sin is manifest in the Cat, for they carry Sin about them.

Were it not of sufficient disapprobation that Cats were Animals, they have the vile heresy to pretend to religious practices and beliefs that are in direct contradiction to those of Good Christians. It is said that it is the strength of their religious belief that has kept Cats in fortitude and courage in the face of the pogroms and concentration camps to which they have been confronted over the centuries, but no punishment, by flame, live burial, skinning alive or the most extreme and gross torture, can not be justified when a Right Thinking Christian is faced with the provocation of a Cat's existence.

In addition to these two aspects there is also the Sinful presence of a Royal Family in the Kingdom of Cats. There can only be one Kingdom of worth and that is the **Kingdom of Heaven** presided over by **God the Father** flanked by **God the Son** and the **Holy Ghost**. How can any individual, especially an Animal, pretend to higher authority than those of others, even Her Maphrodite, when only **God** has True Authority which He divests only in the Priests and those ordained to execute His commands?

It is also known that Cats are in possession of great wealth, which they claim to

have accumulated by hard work and endeavour. This can not be true, for they have gained their wealth rather by prostitution, racketeering and drug-smuggling. They may have a reputation for working long hours and wisely investing their ill-gotten gains, but how can it be right for any Animal to possess greater wealth than the lowliest Man?

Good Christians know that Cats, together with Monsters and other Animals have conspired in depriving Man of the Wealth and Bounty that is decreed to him by **God**, who has created Man in His Own Image, and in the process have caused great misery and deprivation among Men. Who knows how many crowns and guineas that rightfully belong to Man have been sequestered by the usurious speculation of the Cat, by which they seek to spread their pagan beliefs, their sacrilegious Monarchy and their bestiality? There is a Divine Order to be maintained, with Man at the Apex of all Earthly Things - for these have been given to Man in compensation for the vileness of Woman and the Serpent - and Cats deserve only the Eternal Fires, the Infinite Tortures and Unceasing Misery that are their Deserved Lot in the Kingdom of Hell, under the jurisdiction of Satan, the foulest of all Creation.

The Priest then asked me about my purpose for being in the Borough of Divinity, so I explained to him that I was on a quest to find the Truth. He appeared appalled by this, for, as he expostulated, a search for the Truth must necessarily be blasphemous, as the **Lord Jesus Christ** through the **Great Prophet Saint Isaac Newton** had already deigned to reveal the Truth to Good Christians. To deny this fact was to express a heresy most foul.

The Truth is invested solely in the correct interpretation of the **Holy Scriptures** as practised by the **Only True Church**. All that a Good Christian need do is unquestioningly follow the Four Pillars of the **One True Faith** and on meeting his

Maker, all the Truth there is will be revealed to him. The Priest then advised me to practise the Four Pillars of the **One True Faith**.

First, I should instantly abandon my heretical search and accept without question the **Doctrine of True Christianity**. My Soul was not to be saved unless I followed each one of the Christian practises as outlined in the Ten Commandments and in the preachings of **Jesus Christ** and **His Disciples**. I must accept all that I was instructed by **Jesus Christ**'s earthly representatives, the Priests of the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ**. Knowledge of the Truth could only be gained by a full understanding of the **Holy Scriptures** as correctly interpreted.

This necessarily entailed conformance to the Second Pillar which is **Absolute Observation of the Rituals inspired by the Lord**. I should immediately take confession, pray the regulated number of times at the appointed times of the day and attend Chapel at the recommended intervals. The Truth could not be revealed to those who had not behaved in the manner appropriate to a Good Christian: a Good and Blameless life.

I must abandon all material values. All that I owned must become the property of the **Holy Parish of the Divinity of Christ**. In this way the **One True Faith** would benefit and in recognition of my sacrifice I might gain some opportunity of **Eternal Salvation**. The Truth could not be revealed to those who clung stubbornly to material values and had not abandoned themselves entirely to the Spiritual World.

I must immediately reject anything that would entail my Spiritual Corruption. To even entertain departure from the Borough of Divinity to seek the Truth elsewhere would naturally be sufficient evidence that I was not one who wished to become a Good Christian and therefore acceptable to the **Holy Parish**.

The Choice was thus quite clear to the Priest. I either surrendered myself utterly and completely, until Death do come, to the Four Pillars of the **One True Faith**, or my presence in the **Holy Parish**, and within four leagues of it, was totally unacceptable and I should leave immediately, on pain of death. The Priest then asked me directly if I were then, without the least caveat, willing to follow the **One True Faith**.

When I replied, without great conviction, that I needed to think about this proposal at greater length, the Priest informed me that this hesitancy was in itself impermissible and that for fear of my pagan Soul corrupting the Souls of Good Christians I should immediately depart from the Borough of Divinity. He then turned around and left me to watch his dark-gowned figure approach the door to the Holy Parish. He stood at the entrance and waved his arm at me. I understood this gesture to mean that I should make haste to leave, so I walked back in the direction from which I had come. After a few yards, I looked back to see that the Priest had disappeared, although I'd not heard the door open or close, and I was now left alone in the long shadows of the late evening.

As I retraced my steps, the last of the daylight disappeared and it was now darker than I had ever known it to be in the Suburbs. There were no lampposts or belisha beacons to guide my way: the only light there was came from the stars and a moon currently hidden behind the clouds. In all directions there was nothing but darkness and an encroaching night chill partly warded off by the heavy gown.

I soon came to the tree where Anna was still sitting, her arms wrapped around her knees and her head facing down. She heard me coming and raised her head as I approached. "I thought you'd never blinking return! They didn't want you to enter

their precious parish either, I suppose?”

“No, they didn’t,” I admitted. “They were very firm about it.”

“They’re flipping nutters! I hate every last flipping one of them! What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m not flipping staying here! We’ll go to Endon, if you like. It’s a bit of a way, and I’m not that excited about spending my time with Insects, but it must be better than Divinity.”

I accepted Anna’s suggestion, so she stood up and we walked along together towards the crossroads where the Exile was sitting. He saw us coming, but, as Anna noted, he turned around to face away from us. As we approached closer, he deliberately avoided even looking vaguely in our direction, rotating his dark-gowned body around to avoid facing us.

I felt very grateful for Anna’s presence as we walked in the dark, our shadows projecting onto the dark road and into the fields beyond, as she expressed gratitude for mine. It was undoubtedly unnerving to be in an environment as wholly quiet and empty as this with only the stars to guide our way. Anna wasn’t very chatty - and I also felt very subdued - and this was partly due to the way our voices reverberated like unwelcome intrusions in the silence of the night, just as our physical presence had been to the Holy Parish.

After a while, I was feeling very tired of the long monotonous walk and pleased when we approached a high dark wall which stretched out to perhaps encircle the Borough of Divinity. We walked through a wide open gateway, leaving the regulated order of the borough and into what seemed to be a forest overshadowing the pathway.

There was no sign of a place to stay the night, but as soon as we'd passed through, Anna drew in a deep breath.

"At last! We're out of that dreadful place!" She looked around at the overshadowing grass and enormous flowers high above our head. "This *must* be Endon! We'll just have to sleep in the open air."

"Open air?" I'd never slept outside of a warm bed before.

"No choice! But we've got these gowns: so we should be alright!" Anna looked at me sympathetically, her eyes and teeth the only discernible details in the darkness of her clothes and skin. "Don't worry. This may not be the Suburbs, and it's certainly not comfortable, but it'll be safe. And don't worry about the creepy-crawlies!"

I was now grateful for the heavy black gown and hat I'd acquired in the Borough of Divinity, which made a very welcome blanket for me as Anna and I stretched out on the long strands of grass beneath the wall separating Endon from Divinity. It was difficult getting to sleep, however, as all around were the strangest noises I'd ever heard of constant rustling and occasional buzzing. Every now and then was the crash of something breaking through the tall sheaves of wheat or monstrous weeds and a hum of movement through the dark night sky. This was totally unlike the Suburbs, where the buzz of night sounds was associated with preparing for the day ahead. Here, however, the sounds were not those of pre-set videos clicking off, aeroplanes flying overhead or the odd car driving by. They were quite different: both unfamiliar and disconcerting.

Anna didn't seem too troubled, however. She lay down on the grass with her hood covering her head and face and her legs pulled up towards her stomach. I looked

at her face which betrayed no expression, her eyes closed and her thick lips slightly open. The rhythms of her breathing slightly stirred the folds of her gown. I was comforted by her relaxation, so I turned my head away and using my arm as a pillow, I gradually fell asleep under the curious gaze of innumerable, concealed arthropoda.

5

Endon was imposing but most of all frightening, I decided when the humming, buzzing, squawking and shrieking of its denizens compelled me to open my eyes. Anna remained asleep, unconcerned by the appalling noise. We had been sleeping under a dandelion more than fifty feet high, and the long palm-like leaves beneath us belonged to a species of moss. There were monstrous buttercups, several times taller than me, and towering above everything were the long shadows of daffodils extending in the morning sun.

If the flora was of a scale completely beyond my previous experience, so too was the fauna. When I was warned that the borough of Endon was inhabited by giant arthropods, I had not been prepared to see two-foot long ants and termites, wasps half my size flying overhead, butterflies as large as hand-gliders, centipedes whose legs and body stretched on and on, and snails the size of small cars. Fortunately, none of them were particularly interested in our presence, as we lay wrapped in our recently obtained gowns: now so thoroughly soaked by dew they were best forsaken.

This was Anna's opinion when she eventually awoke, throwing her gown off disdainfully and exposing a pair of tight white shorts and a singlet that bared all her midriff. She wore rubber-soled boots at the end of long bare legs which were altogether reasonable for long walks such as we'd had the previous night. She raked her fingers through her beaded hair and viewed the landscape with some amazement.

"It's jolly astounding! I just didn't believe there was so much disproportion in such a small borough. It's a mystery these insects are content to remain here and not

take over the world! At least not everyone here's an outsize creepy crawlie..." she pointed to a tiger chatting to a merman under the shadow of a toadstool, "...but there are still too blooming many of them for my taste."

We abandoned the cloaks on top of some smaller mushrooms and followed the path as it wound past clumps of enormous daisies and knee-high moss, and crumbled under the strain of cabbage-sized algae. The path had lost all its rectilinearity and now wandered hither and thither, past interminable columns of termites, beneath colossal spider-webs and past the capsized body of a tank-like beetle whose companions were trying to righten. Anna chatted as we walked along, now much more cheerful. She intended to go into the Subterranean City of Endon, which she was sure was somewhere round here, and catch a train back to Lambdeth. She'd had enough of travelling for the moment, and would be glad just to return to her friends and relax.

The entrance to the City resembled the doorway to an underground railway station and was heralded by immense neon-lights. Outside were long lines of ants and other small insects hanging around and seemingly without very much to do. There was a general buzz of excitement, but no sense of actual achievement. Gadflies were selling newspapers, ladybirds were selling snacks and soft drinks, and a tiny stall attended by a woodlouse was selling lottery tickets. A tiger reading a newspaper sat nonchalantly by a family of mayflies. The tract was paved by tiny haphazard paving stones. It was very peculiar to find such a portal, mostly enveloped in vines and grass leaves, resting otherwise alone in the middle of such dense jungle.

A mermaid sat decorously and unclothed on a bench, just by an advertisement hoarding for underarm deodorant. Beside her were several ants, one of which was particularly agitated and was arguing with a six-foot high green grasshopper in a green

top hat and frock coat, who was gesticulating his four gloved forearms, while supporting his body on long spindly hind legs. His antennae were waving as excitedly as his several mandibles. The grasshopper appeared to be in dispute about something, but whatever it was he settled by cuffing the ant curtly across the face and strode away leaving the smaller insect in humiliation and pain. He had a newspaper under one forearm and a cane in another, leaving two buried in the pockets of his waistcoat. He saw us and deliberately strode towards us.

“Did you see that Damned ant?” he exclaimed. “The fellow had absolutely no Damned respect for his betters. He was trying to tell me - Sir George Greenback! - that I had no more Damned rights than he. He was trying to extort more farthings for the services he supplied in carrying my Damned bags. These ants: they claim to work hard, but in truth they’re nothing but lazy idle sluggards! I don’t know how anyone can stand their Damnable impudence. What do you think, my lad?”

I wasn’t sure what to say, but Anna had no such problem. “It takes all sorts make a world.”

“It does indeed! Too many Damned sorts, if you want my opinion!” He viewed us through the countless lenses of his green eyes, his antennae twitching restlessly. As he spoke his mandibles moved sideways as well as up and down. “You’re not from these parts are you?”

“Not at all,” I replied. “It’s the first time I’ve visited the borough.”

“Ah! An exotic stranger!” chuckled the grasshopper. “And you, young lady, I’d fain believe that you too are new here.” Anna admitted so. “In that case, may I have the honour of showing you around the City of Endon?”

“That’s jolly kind of you!” Anna remarked.

“It is that,” Sir George admitted, “but I consider it my duty to extend such hospitality to mammalian visitors such as you. Furthermore, I deign that I can protect you from the unwanted attention of the Damnable ants, termites and other scum who would offer to guide you through the labyrinthine roads of Endon for nothing more than pecuniary advantage. I heartily despise such opportunist trade.”

The grasshopper’s eyes scanned the gathered mass of insects. “Endon’s a Damnably complex city for those who have never visited it before. A newcomer could easily get lost in its tunnels, and the unwary is easy prey to predatory wasps or mantises. But if you know your place, you shouldn’t be afraid.”

“And you know *your* place, I believe,” guessed Anna.

“That I well do. I’m no proletarian or peasant like these Damned ants. Grasshoppers are of the highest order: cultured, sophisticated and courteous. Only butterflies compare with us in exaltation. Below are all sorts from dragonflies to slugs, from locusts to worms. And in this great city you encounter people of all orders and genera. There are the industrious bees, who keep themselves apart from everyone else in their own suburbs, and worms with which nobody would wish to associate themselves. But when we enter Endon, you’ll see for yourselves what the city has to offer. Follow me.”

Sir George strode ahead on his incredibly long hindlegs, while Anna and I hurried to keep pace with him. The door led to a precipitous escalator that descended down through the earth to a small square of light at the bottom. Alongside the escalator were posters advertising perfumes, films and financial services. The whole was lit by the soft glow of neon tubes which extended along the roof of this tunnel and every tunnel through which we subsequently passed.

“You need to know your place in Endon, for sure,” Sir George commented as we descended. “People from outside, I’ve noticed, have scant regard to social position. Here everyone has his own status and standing, and woe betide those, like that Damned surly Ant, who treat those such as I with less respect than we deserve. But even though the mores and standards of strangers such as yourself are totally alien to the good citizens of Endon, we respect you and only require you to reciprocate in kind.”

At the bottom of the escalator, the city of Endon opened up to reveal a vast neon-lit cavern spreading out in all directions to form a broad plaza scattered with huge statues and tall monumental buildings. The statues featured insects, spiders and snails in full splendour and regalia, brandishing swords, seated on giant beetles or standing in pride of their municipal glory. All about were small groups of insects with their heads bent back to admire the monuments. I was particularly taken by the statue of a tiger with its lower half composed of a large fish’s tail.

Anna gasped. “You just wouldn’t believe there’d be so much blinking Art beneath a flipping forest!”

“It *is* Damnably impressive,” proudly admitted Sir George, raising his top hat dramatically. “The citizens of Endon have always prided themselves on their æstheticism. You mammals never suspect that arthropods can produce so much splendour.” He pointed towards a grand building in the near distance. “That is the Municipal Art Gallery, and if we had the time I would take great pleasure in showing you round. There is so much to see of Endon Art: its paintings, sculpture and architecture. You have nothing in the City to compare with this!”

“I wouldn’t be so jolly certain!” laughed Anna.

“Pah! You mammals always think that you have the best of everything! But, God’s Wounds! most of it is just foolishness. So much of what your chordate Art Critics call Art has no essential value at all. There are travesties of Art in your Art Galleries which could be produced by children or imbeciles. And that which is not merely amateurish and incompetent is Hellishly obscene.”

“So what is it that defines Art then?” challenged Anna.

Sir George strode purposefully towards a grand statue of a heroic millipede raised on its hinder legs clutching a large cross in several of its limbs and a mitre perched on its head. We scurried behind him.

“Here, for instance, is Art serving its primary function which is to instil virtue in its beholders. Art - Good Art, that is - should inculcate good Christian values, respect for authority and order, a good life and a ceaseless striving towards new greatness. What can Art be if the viewer isn’t uplifted by it? Simon Peter Wept! Art should galvanise the spirit, fill one with aspirations of greatness and instruct the proletariat and peasantry in proper awe of the society they also serve.”

“Surely, that’s not jolly well all that Art’s about.”

“It most assuredly is! It certainly is not for preaching amorality and disharmony; as do the disgusting pruriences that masquerade as Art in vertebrate culture which so unsettle the aesthete. Why should I choose to rub my face in the excrescences of the world? There is already quite enough filth and scum!”

“I’m sure there’s more to Art than that,” Anna disputed. “Surely all this stuff - impressive though it is - shows just a small part of what there is in the world. Shouldn’t Art do more than simply show the higher and more refined things in life?”

“Perhaps Art should show excretion, poverty and disease,” scoffed Sir George.

“I think not! Art should elevate the Soul. Not oppress it. Art is to instruct not revulse. And to do this, it venerates the more splendid things in the world. Art should be of recognisable things. Objects that one can grasp, that reflect the physical reality of Animal existence. I know that in the City and elsewhere, there are Artists - as they mockingly entitle themselves - who produce misshapen paintings, who eschew form and structure altogether to cover canvasses in wild, random doodlings. Charlatans who abandon the noble materials of canvas, paint and stone, to flaunt their insanity with the most unimaginably gross materials. These people do nothing more than decorate the walls of Hell, and I imagine damnation is precisely what is waiting for them.”

“That’s a bit jolly harsh!” Anna replied good-humouredly. “I’m sure the Artists who dedicate their lives to producing the sort of Art you don’t like aren’t doing it just to tempt damnation.”

“You may laugh, but I’m most Damnably serious. I am convinced that one reason why mammalian culture is so decadent and reprobate is precisely because of the tolerance it shows towards Art that subverts the Social Order. I have heard that there are boroughs that even finance these unholy execrations with taxpayer money. I would greatly object to know that what little of my income my accountant permits the tax man to collect should be squandered on something that serves only to spread revolt in the lower orders and dissent in the middle classes. Art is not, or should not, be seen as nothing more than an excuse for the indulgences of a self-appointed élite who want me and my kind deprived of their justly earned wealth and position. God’s Wounds! Do you envisage Sir George, knighted for his Services to Industry and the Social Order, would for one moment condone the very rubbishing of all that he stands for?”

Anna must have concluded that this argument was becoming too impassioned,

so she pointed at a group of troubadour ladybirds performing at the foot of the statue of a large butterfly in a suit of armour. “Shall we listen to them? They sound jolly good!”

Sir George turned his head in the direction of the music, but made no attempt to move towards them nor indeed to change his subject of conversation. “Performing Arts, whether theatre, film or music, serves the same function as Visual Art. It must enlighten. It must enhance the Social Order. And it must tell a story. However, I’m not a prude. I enjoy music hall and comic opera just as much as the next man. I like to go to the theatre with my companions, to sit in the box and watch the Thespian entertain. But significantly seating arrangements of the theatre reinforces the Social Order and affords the lower classes the opportunity to reflect on the inherent superiority of those who by virtue of birth and effort (in both of which I am a sterling success) are necessarily of a more elevated position.”

Anna was biting her lower lip, to restrain herself from criticism, so I politely remarked that Sir George was evidently very passionate about Art.

“And Art is not all I am passionate about, young man. I have studied the Sciences as well, for which I have the greatest regard. And is it not curious that the Sciences have again and again reinforced my views concerning natural order and the probity of honest effort? Is this not proved by the Theory of Evolution which has shown how advanced Animals such as Grasshoppers and Butterflies have ascended over lower orders by virtue of the Survival of the Fittest? I keep myself very fit, I can assure you. Has it not demonstrated that the pivots of the Universe are the larger, brighter spheres, which resemble Her Maphrodite and the Aristocracy who shine from the centre of the Social Universe? And even now the Science of Economics is

resolving those great eternal questions relating to the generation of crowns, shillings and groats: the very oil which drives the wheels of Commerce and Industry and ensures the generation of Wealth! If Art always aspired to the expression of virtue as Science does to describing and explaining it, then I would never have cause to complain about the abominations pretending to such an elevated station.”

We left the main plaza, past more municipal buildings, to where a number of tunnels were radiating away in all directions. Some of the tunnels were quite high and wide, sufficiently so to contain rows of houses and apartment blocks. Some were only wide enough for a single car to drive along. All were lit by the same neon glow that permeated the plaza.

“And what would you like to see? Where would you like to go? Endon has everything you should wish to see; all that a body might wish.”

“I wouldn’t mind finding a railway station,” volunteered Anna. “I’d like to catch a train to Lambdeth.”

“That should be no problem. Endon has a very impressive station, as befits a city of its population and industrial significance. And you, young man? Do you also wish to catch a train?”

“I’ve got no particular destination,” I admitted. “I’m quite happy to see more of Endon.”

“And that you will! God’s Wounds! He who tires of Endon, tires of life itself! There is more to see than you could ever hope to find in Lambdeth.” He strode along one of the medium-sized tunnels which had shop windows glazing its walls, with clothes, white goods, computer software and locally manufactured honey tastefully displayed inside. The clothes shops had the models of some very various arthropods

accommodated by an astonishing variety of fashions and styles. Clothes that flattered the thorax, the abdomen and carapace of any insect or arachnid. Anna was evidently less impressed by the shops than I, but her eye was caught by a very prominent poster almost completely obscuring an empty shop window.

As my attention was distracted from the sight of insects, tigers, spiders and other shoppers, I noticed many other posters plastered about, and most were connected with the General Election. The one that had attracted Anna's eye featured simply the face of a koala wearing a broad-rimmed hat looking benignly out at the world. Underneath was the single word **Illicit**, which I recalled was the name of one of the political parties contesting the Election.

"Who's the koala?" I asked naïvely.

"Don't you know!" exclaimed Anna, raising her eyebrows. "Golly! You Suburban people are *so* jolly ignorant. It's Chairman Rupert, the leader of the Illicit Party and president of his own country which he's renamed - modestly I'm sure! - as the Illiberal Socialist Republic of Rupert."

"The Damnable imposture of the Marsupial!" Sir George assented. "How can a classless four-thumbed Animal like him claim so much self-importance that he should name an entire country after himself? Even I haven't arrogated my power and influence to the extent of renaming my land the Sir George Estate, but there are those for whom pride knows no bounds!"

"So, what do you think of the General Election?" Anna wondered. "Are you going to vote Illicit? Or have you got better options?"

"Are you an Illicitist, young lady? Are you one of those who want to merge this proud nation with the Illicit Republic and replace Her Maphrodite by a eucalyptus-

eating mammal?”

“Goodness, no! As if I jolly well would. But everywhere you go there are more and more people switching their allegiance to the Illicit Party. It’s like some sort of fashion.”

“Simon Peter Wept! For an antipodean dictator!”

“I think it might be to do with general disenchantment with the established parties. After all, it’s the only major party that doesn’t name itself after a colour...”

“And what’s so Damnably wrong with that! It’s the way parties have always been identified, and I see no Godly reason why this proud tradition should not continue. But, you’re right, my dear, there is great disenchantment. And can you blame the people when there are candidates such as *these* standing for election.” He gestured a long spindly forelimb at a poster featuring a very sincere looking ant above the slogan **The Red Party - Working for the People**. “These scum who claim to represent the interests of the poor, downtrodden and the workers. All they wish to do is replace the rule of Law and Order, enshrined by status and tradition, by nothing better than the rule of the mob. They would see this nation run by ants and termites. They would destroy art, enslave the aristocracy in concentration camps and thoroughly ruin the nation’s economy. It is not only self-interest which decides my opposition to these peasants, but also concern for the interests of industry. Capital would flee these shores were the Red Party to gain power and it would be an unparalleled disaster for all those who have worked so hard to make this nation great.”

“Would you support the Green Party, then?” Anna asked.

“They are little better than the Reds! Perhaps they have some ideas I agree with, preserving many of the traditions of our nation, but all they would do is reverse

the thrust of Progress. They would demand unacceptable restrictions on industry. Profits would plummet, economic growth would be stifled, capital would flee, and we would all have to become vegetarians.”

“What about this lot, then?” Anna indicated a poster featuring a very heroic figure looking into the far distance carrying a sword with blood dripping from its blade. The poster was mostly composed of bold black lines on a dark blue background, with the slogan **The Voice of Reason**. “Do you think the Black Party is the one you’d support?”

“They are no more the *Voice of Reason* than the Red Party. In fact, the two are equally Damned, I believe, because they both wish to subvert the natural Social Order. They are a Party that takes good honourable policies and perverts them with a doctrine of hatred and xenophobia. They would also replace Her Maphrodite by a Damned president and would frighten off capital as assuredly as the Red Party. They have some very strange opinions regarding insects. Their wooing of the arachnid vote is extremely worrying: I wouldn’t like a hairy eight-legged individual telling *me* what to do.”

Sir George gestured at two other posters high above the shops on a hoarding. One featured nothing more than a blank space, with the words **Vote White - You Know It Makes Sense**. The other featured a mixture of apparently contented arthropods over the slogan **Continuity, Tradition, Happiness**, and by the side was a box with a blue tick in it. “The White Party has never stood for anything I have disagreed with. Nor have they stood for anything I have ever really believed in at all passionately. But as always my vote will go to the Blue Party.” He pointed a forelimb at the poster of contented citizens. “It is the Blue Party that most assuredly represents the *Voice of Reason*, and it is to them I have donated party funds and it is they who,

God Willing! will triumph in the General Election and at last this nation will be steered gently and firmly to the betterment of industry, commerce and greater weal.”

Anna smiled and made no comment. She addressed me. “So you know nothing about the Illicit Party at all.”

I creased my forehead. “I’m afraid so.”

“I’m no expert, but I’ve got friends who are jolly interested in it. Mostly because they oppose it. The name *Illicit* is a kind of contraction of *Illiberal Socialist*, I believe.”

“Damnable socialists like the Red Party!” snorted Sir George. “How can any right-thinking individual support a party associated with socialism?”

“I don’t know that they are any more socialist than the flipping National Socialists, but it’s their name and I suppose it explains some of their appeal for the working classes. But the party is one which has grown very popular in a very short time. Five years ago, no one had even heard of the Illicit Party or Chairman Rupert. Now the party is one of the biggest in the country.”

“The Damned bounder Rupert has lied his way to power and influence in a way that even Machiavelli would find dishonourable. In his own country, he has made his way from the leader of just one of countless fringe parties to becoming its dictator. The people there must be of the damned to endorse him.”

“I’m sure his rise to fame had something to do with the blinking mess his country was in. Far worse than this country...”

“That would be Damnably hard to believe! This, so-called Chairman, Rupert takes power by devious and fiendish means, and then suppresses all free discussion and imprisons anyone who’s ever disagreed with him...”

“I don’t know what his does in his own country, but some of the tales of book-burning, concentration camps, forced labour, purges, pogroms and persecution ... It sounds flipping horrid! And he looks such a harmless creature. You wouldn’t blooming imagine that such a cute looking koala could be the author of anything like that!”

“Nothing you Damned mammals do surprises me!” Sir George strode on, and we again had to nearly run to keep up with his long elegant strides. “Just look at the marsupial! He wears a hat like Napoleon, a collarless dark suit, and shakes his Damned paws about like some insane lunatic.”

“I’ve heard his political addresses are very inspiring,” commented Anna, “but I’ve never met anyone who could give me a good explanation as to what Illiberal Socialist policies actually are.”

“Isn’t that just like the White Party?” I asked.

“There’s nothing remotely sinister about the White Party. Nobody could object to better street-lighting, more public libraries or wider car-parking spaces. But the Illicit Party has some jolly odd ideas on a whole host of things, and a lot of them seem to contradict each other...”

“He seems too Damnably fond of mites and spiders, I woot. But he does have some progressive views regarding Art...”

“You mean the Art you like. A lot of Artists have had to emigrate from the blinking Illicit Republic...”

“...Coming over here with their Damned decadent and amoral work. The Art he encourages is at least inspirational.”

“He is jolly keen on his own image, though,” Anna commented. “If you like huge statues, paintings or posters of Chairman Rupert looking heroic, then the Illicit

Republic is the place to be. He has even had arches modelled from his furry limbs, castle ramparts modelled on his tufty ears and his head is on all the currency.”

“He has certainly stimulated the economy of his country...”

“...Only at the expense of the trades unions,” countered Anna. “He has been very kind to businessmen - slashing taxes and lavish with state subsidies - but he’s not been very kind to women, the poor, the unemployed and, I gather, to what was left of the Aristocracy...”

“His Damnable treatment of his social betters is an international scandal,” agreed Sir George. “He exiled all the princes, dukes and barons of his country and confiscated all their wealth, so that he could finance his grandiose schemes...”

“It was jolly popular with the natives...” remarked Anna untactfully. Sir George declined to comment. “The Illicit Party is getting to be jolly popular in this country too. There are already several Illicit Party town and village councils. I imagine they’re fairly popular in Endon as well...”

“Mostly with the Damnable Arachnids!” snorted Sir George. “I have little doubt that good sense and reason will prevail and this borough will reject the swine. I would not have thought it likely that the citizens of Endon would surrender sovereignty to a mere pouched mammal!”

The tunnel widened as Sir George led us past the shops, houses and office blocks lining our way and the ceiling now arching high above us. It was generally busier as insects ran back and forth on their business. Termites pedalled by on specially designed bicycles. A small trolley was pulled along by four disgruntled cockroaches. A spider sat in an enormous web high above us as houseflies, the size of dogs, flew gingerly by. A tiger moth swooped down and brushed Anna with its dusty wings

before gliding off into the distance.

Anna was not amused as she brushed off the dust that had scattered over her. “Ughh! I think some of it’s got into my mouth!” she cursed, rubbing the back of her hand over her thick lips. “Some of these insects are utterly disgusting!”

Sir George laughed at Anna’s discomfort. “God’s Wounds! Don’t think that the people of Endon aren’t similarly disgusted by you endoskeletal, furry bipeds.”

“All I can say,” countered Anna, “is that I’m glad that not everywhere is like Endon.”

We arrived at another junction of tunnels by which there was a large subterranean lake in which mermaids were frolicking with water boatmen and caddis flies. The gleam of neon tubes reflected off the water’s still surface, on which floated enormous waterlilies while immense reeds towered overhead. Sir George escorted us to a car ferry which took us gently across the dark waters to some more tunnels on the other side. Anna and I leaned over the ferry’s side to look at the dragonflies swooping above in the distant heights of the reeds, while Sir George chatted amiably with the ferry’s skipper, a moderately bulky green beetle.

“I don’t think I’m so enamoured by all these creepy-crawlies!” Anna confided to me as the ferry ploughed through the dark viscous waters. “I mean, Sir George is alright. But his funny face and those eyes! You don’t know where to jolly well look! And you can’t be sure where he’s looking either. I’m dying to get away from here to more human company.”

“So you’re returning to Lambdeth?”

“You can come too, if you like,” Anna offered. “It’s a lot more fun than Endon and I’m sure I can show you many more interesting things than you’ll ever find with all

these scaly monsters. It's quite an arty place, what with the University and all the students. And it's got at least as much history as this place... Oooh! Look!" She pointed at a couple of mermaids jumping in and out of the water in the near distance. They then disappeared under the surface and totally out of sight.

"I'm not sure..." I said dubiously, not wishing to offend Sir George who was waving at us cheerfully with one of his arms. He strode towards us, holding his top hat in two of his other arms.

"We're very close to the Station," he announced. "You can see it there on the shore." And there indeed, just by a quay where some boats were gently bobbing in the quite still water, was the entrance to another tunnel with timetables, maps and posters outside and the words **Endon Central** over the top of the doorway. There was a general buzz of activity with insects sitting by their baggage, some selling their wares and a few brawny cockroaches and spiders waiting with rickshaws. The ferry finally docked on the shore and we disembarked. There was a train for Lambdeth leaving within minutes at 11 o'clock, and so Anna rushed away rather swiftly to ensure she wouldn't miss it. The next one wasn't due for another six hours.

As a result of her haste, Sir George and I didn't have the opportunity to give her more than the most peremptory of goodbyes. She briefly kissed me on the cheek, assured me that we'd probably meet again, and rushed through to the platform in a flurry of black skin and white clothes. She waved at us from the platform, as she jumped onto the modern and very rapid train standing there.

Sir George sighed as we turned away and headed down a tunnel past more shops. "That woman is Damned impudent, don't you think, young man? If she were a grasshopper I don't think I could have stood for it at all, but as a human being, I'm

really not able to correct her. Women are necessary evils, I believe. It is their duty to serve us men in their dual rôles as providers of domestic comfort and sexual pleasure, and beyond that it is best they stray as little as possible. I know that my views on the natural subservience of the weaker sex are unlikely to find much favour with the modern miss, such as your dark-hued friend, but they are nonetheless sincerely felt. Don't you find the futile attempts of females such as she to stand up for herself in the face of the undeniable superiority of our gender rather touching?"

A female grasshopper in a long dress whose train was supported by two ladybirds happened to be walking towards us. Sir George halted and bowed low with a sweep of his top hat as she passed by, one of her forelimbs waving a fan in front of her face, and using the others to keep her dress from trailing on the cigarette-butt strewn floor. He righted himself after she had gone by.

"Naturally, I believe in gallantry, as well," Sir George assented. "Just as it is the rôle of the stronger sex to provide and protect, the woman's is to accept, with becoming demureness, her position to support the male in his industry. A woman is to be useful as well as decorative: and the service they best provide is, of course, in the generation of children. I have sown my seed widely, I confess, and there are many batches of eggs I can claim to have inseminated, but my ambition, and that of all good Christians, is to sire offspring to the best of women and to provide the best for my inheritance.

"Never let it be said that I don't have the best interests for women at heart. But there is a limit to what a woman should be permitted to do, which your friend from Baldam would no doubt dispute. I fail to see any good reason why they should be allowed to vote. I fear it is the woman's vote which may be to blame if the Blue Party

fails to win the General Election. That, and the imprudent over-extension of the franchise. It is plain that women are the lesser sex. How many great female artists are there, for instance? And can one imagine any woman having the leadership qualities necessary to become a prime minister or a president?"

I didn't comment, although I was sure that there had indeed been several women who had succeeded quite well in these very things. The tunnel wound along and away, and was now much narrower. There was a curious form of lane discipline whereby everyone walked on the left and all collisions were avoided despite the flamboyant wings sported by several of the larger insects.

All along the side of the tunnel, now constructed of clay-like earth, were holes which were the doors and windows of very unsophisticated homes. The inhabitants were now generally much smaller, represented primarily by ants, mites and termites. A serpent-sized worm wriggled by between our legs. A cockroach scurried past, furiously twitching his giant antennae.

"This isn't such a wealthy district of Endon," I observed.

"In truth, no," agreed Sir George. "The scum of the city must live somewhere, and this, I'm afraid, is one of their districts. I apologise for having brought you into such close contact with the lowest of Endon society, dominated by ants and other inferior species."

"Are ants innately inferior?"

"God's wounds! You cannot compare them with beings such as I with epithets other than inferior or unfortunate. There is a natural order in Endon's society, as there is in mammalian society, and in keeping with this, just as there are those blessed with intelligence, æsthetic sensitivity and wealth, there must necessarily be those denied any

of these things. Beings such as ants were created by the Lord to be wholly subservient to those of greater wisdom and aptitude such as I. It is only just and right that they should occupy such a rôle, just as it is right that I should have the advantages of my wealth and status.”

“Are there many poor districts like this in the city?” I wondered, experiencing great difficulty in navigating through the scattered piles of litter and rubbish. I hoped that we’d soon find our way to a precinct not distinguished by peeling posters, huge heaps of neglected dung and with so many insects squatting by the roadside with limbs outstretched and pleading for alms.

“Like any city, Endon has a full variety of districts from the highest to the lowest,” sniffed Sir George, studiously ignoring the beggars’ entreaties. “There are much better appointed quarters, such as where I live, with magnificent, pleasantly designed houses. They have wide streets and the houses have spacious gardens. It is there that the most peerless of Endon’s citizens live, with their staff of inferior invertebrates to tend the gardens, clean the streets and secure our properties from invasion by the scum you see here.

“Then there are these districts of urban hell, where the Red Party is unquestionably very popular, preaching rebellion and disorder. Areas rife with crime, murder, drugs and violence. Full of the unemployed, the idle and the feckless. Areas which should by rights be purged from the city and whose loss would not be in the slightest bit detrimental to the city’s vitality.

“In between these extremes of sophistication and degradation, there are the districts of the artisans, mostly bees, who toil hard and are more content living in modest homes where they manufacture white goods, honey, electrical components and

motor cars. Then there are districts inhabited by merchants, accountants, dentists and teachers. More ordered than here but less opulent than where I live. And finally there are the districts for the honest workers - the clerks, factory-workers, soldiers and policemen - not as poor as this but certainly not wealthy.

“But below all others and too far below for me to even bear to address, certainly to touch and without which the city of Endon would be improved are districts like this: for scum who have no real part in our society. I am told that nearly 50% of the city lives in these districts. I know that if the Red Party were to have their way this mutinous crowd of the unemployed, the criminal and the state-dependent would consume all of Endon by fire, smoke and anarchy. I am just grateful that the majority of this rabble is too illiterate, apathetic and disorganised to ever pose a threat to the social order, but if they were to ever arise... Why then, Endon would be Hell on earth! Grasshoppers and butterflies would be crucified and their wealth confiscated. Bees and Wasps would be slaughtered by their own stings. Ladybirds, Dragonflies and Locusts would have their wings removed. That is a day I hope I shall never see.”

I hoped so too, feeling rather uneasy as the kaleidoscope of myriad eyes expressionlessly watched Sir George and I proceed quickly through the long narrow tunnels intentionally not engaging their attention. There were ants and termites gathered in menacing gangs by barred windows. There were cockroaches lying in apparent stupor in the unglazed windows. A tiger with dark glasses was huddled in conference with several ants by the stairs of a fire escape, at the foot of a tall termite-mound. I definitely didn't feel very welcome in this neighbourhood.

The tunnel soon widened to accommodate factories, abattoirs and warehouses, around which the streets were strewn with plastic cartons, discarded newspapers and

cigarette ends. There were far fewer people, but I could see insects busy at work through the windows of the buildings and there was a general hum of electricity, steam and air-conditioning. The tunnel further widened as we came into a district that must have been one of the more salubrious districts Sir George had mentioned. The houses were large, and could just about be seen behind tall featureless walls topped by broken glass. In front of many houses were small sentry-boxes in which might sit an aggressive looking beetle or spider. The air was clear and clean and songbird-sized mosquitoes fluttered around in the decorative heights of gladioli, rhododendrons and tulips. Besides the guards in front of the houses, there were very few people, although there was plenty of space to hold them. The occasional pond or fountain adorned our way, and monstrous buttercups and daisies lined the roadside.

“Do you live round here?” I asked Sir George.

“Goodness no!” laughed the grasshopper. “Where I live is much better appointed than this. Do you think I would choose to live in such close proximity to the riffraff we’ve just passed? But many quite well-off individuals do choose to live here, and quite a few residences are owned by people not really native to Endon at all. Like Lord Arthur over there.”

He indicated a colossal towering figure, easily thirteen foot high, meandering towards us along the wide roads. He was too large to ever venture down the tunnels we’d emerged from, but he was no insect. At first, blinded by the bright light from the streetlights, I thought he might have been a tiger, but he was in fact an enormous lion quite tall enough to glance over the walls at the houses. Not that he was doing that, as he seemed totally lost in thought and appeared quite frail and weak, despite his massive size and undoubted strength. A once glorious tawny mane was now quite threadbare

and portions of fur were shredding off. His tail drooped sadly behind him.

“Good morning, Lord Arthur,” Sir George called out to the lion when we were within a few yards of him. The grasshopper seemed quite minuscule in comparison to the beast towering high above him, who could easily toss the gangling spindle-legged insect to one side with a single gesture of his monstrous paws.

“Is it still morning, Sir George?” wondered the lion raising his head and coming to a halt just five feet ahead of us. “This morning has seemed *so* very long. And so depressing. My Endon accountant tells me that I may have to sacrifice *all* my holdings in your fair city.” He scanned the district with eyes quite as large as my head. “I have never really appreciated the beauty of your city before, you know, Sir George, and now that my estate and my factories and my shops are to be sold off to cover my debts I feel I am appreciating it rather belatedly.”

“Who are buying your holdings?” wondered the grasshopper.

“What’s left of my holdings,” the lion corrected. “Once I owned more than a fifth of your city’s businesses. The buyers are a consortium of bees. And believe you me, they are robbing me blind! I’m sure the capital wealth it represents is worth at least five times as much as they have paid. And even the several millions of guineas they paid will cover barely a fraction of my debts. But every little helps.”

“Are you staying in Endon for very long, your lordship?”

“Not at all, Sir George. I have business to attend elsewhere. More to sell, I’m afraid. If it were not for the kindness and, dare I say, the great generosity of those friends of mine who have not abandoned me as my stock has sunk on the Exchange, I would have nowhere to stay. Once I had no shortage of homes in this city.”

“Indeed I bought my home from you, Lord Arthur.”

“You did! You enterprising arthropod. Not that I ever visited most of the properties I owned. I bought most of them for speculative reasons, you know.”

“I’m sure you did,” the grasshopper replied approvingly.

“But that was when business was good. Those were the days when the name of Lord Arthur was feared and respected throughout the civilised world. And further than that even. Now I can hardly open the financial pages of a newspaper without seeing articles speculating about *when* - no longer *if* - I will become bankrupt. These are sad days indeed, Sir George.”

“God’s Wounds! They are that! There is no longer the respect and honour due paid to aristocrats and businessmen such as we...”

“That may be so, though I don’t really recall life being any better for it. But it is for me, not the world in general, that I complain. But hold! I must not forever grieve. I have known some very good times. Who is your young friend?”

Sir George introduced me formally to the lion. “He is a stranger whom I’m escorting through the city of Endon.”

“A real stranger too,” Lord Arthur growled indulgently. “There aren’t very many warm-blooded endoskeletons in this city are there? Except for tigers and merpeople. I trust you’ll be taking this young fellow to the Party...”

“I hadn’t thought of that, your lordship, but that would be a *most* diverting way to occupy the afternoon. Are you also likely to come?”

“No. I’m afraid not. As I said, I have too much business elsewhere. I have an appointment at one o’clock I believe with a representative from Delta who wants to buy the last of my fish factory shares. I think I had best make haste or the day will all be gone.”

He twitched his monstrous tail, the tassel of which was larger than my whole body, and unsteadily lumbered off.

“Lord Arthur is old money on hard times,” sighed Sir George. “He is a moral example to us all to retain by all means the wealth we have either inherited or achieved. God’s wounds! It’s incredible to believe that one as wealthy as he could ever have fallen so far. I sincerely hope I never share the same fate.”

“How did he happen to lose his wealth?”

“I’m no economic expert. I employ others to provide me with that expertise and knowledge, but what I have read suggests that Lord Arthur burdened himself with more commitments in steadily declining industries than he could profitably gain from. And then, instead of divesting himself of these commitments or taking advantage of new market conditions, he simply ploughed more and more of his wealth into the hopeless task of keeping these industries going. Eventually of course the whole edifice collapsed about him. I will never allow that to happen to me. I blame the lion for being too sentimental to his employees and not restructuring soon enough.” Sir George paused reflectively. “Still, less of that. I’ll take you to the Party as the good lion suggested. My carriage shouldn’t be too far from here.”

Indeed it wasn’t. Sir George led me through a wide archway, quite large enough for Lord Arthur to have walked through and I stood blinking in the strong midday sun illuminating the forests of Endon. Sir George’s carriage was waiting for us, just as the grasshopper had predicted. It was very exquisite, drawn by a host of swift stag beetles who were snorting and pawing the ground while waiting. Sir George let me into the sumptuous and luxurious interior of his carriage where he opened a bottle of champagne and with a gesture produced a piping hot meal his chef had prepared for

him.

“Our destination is several leagues hence,” the grasshopper announced, “so we’d best have luncheon as we travel. I hope you enjoy my simple tastes.”

The lavish meal of quail eggs, venison, caviar and champagne was somewhat less simple than I was accustomed to, and not having eaten since midday the day before I tucked into it with great relish as the carriage trundled off through the jungle of outsize flora.

6

Zest and chatter from mingling party-goers orchestrated with the remote pulsation of a stereo system greeted me when I arrived at the Party. I was already impressed by the expansive gardens estate that surrounded the imposing manor house. There were large ponds full of enormous trout. A tiger with shears was trimming ornamental hedges near the rosebushes. The long neck of a giraffe rose above a maze where he had a distinct advantage in navigating his way out. In such surroundings I imagined a fairly restrained, possibly formal, party and my main anxiety was that I wasn't suitably dressed.

Within moments of entering the massive hallway, I was separated from my grasshopper companion in a confusion of unfamiliar people and totally lost sight of him. I had been too intent on admiring the painted frieze on the vaulted ceiling from which descended an enormous crystal chandelier. A wide staircase wound from the hallway to a balcony along which gathered many other guests of every species holding glasses of wine or champagne in their hands, paws or hooves, and often with cigarettes of various dimensions drooping from their lips or mandibles.

I felt intimidated by this mass of strangers, which included a tiger in finery, a dolphin in a comfortable leather-lined sofa, a megatherium chatting with a comparatively tiny manticore and an archaeopteryx perched high on a hat stand making drunken conversation with a beret. A pig, a wolf and a similar-sized pygmy elephant wearing frock-coats and spats chatted amiably in a circle. I saw a swirl of guests in other rooms amongst wine-bottles and party food, some dancing to a curious

amalgamation of techno, baroque and waltz.

As I stood transfixed by perplexity, a young girl, perhaps only fourteen or fifteen years old, descended the staircase. She wore a long floral shoulderless dress with a wide-brimmed hat perched on long curly brown hair. As she walked down, the guests greeted her respectfully as she passed by: some with great flourishes as broad feathered or stiff tall hats were swept by, some with respectful bows and some by simple nods of acknowledgement. I guessed that this child was quite celebrated, but I didn't recognise her from my limited knowledge of society débutantes featured on Suburban television. She approached the foot of the stairs and headed towards me.

"Hello," she greeted me, outstretching a thin ivory-white arm. A single gold bracelet rolled down her wrist as she delicately shook my hand. "My father told me that Sir George had brought along a human to his Party. He also declared that you don't know anyone here. Is that so?"

"Yes, it is," I admitted shyly.

"Well, I had better perform my duty as my father's daughter and one of the Party's hostesses. My name is Zitha, in case you didn't already know, and I shall gladly show you around. The house is very extensive. It's got absolutely acres of space. Even with the hundreds of guests we've always got here, it never feels full. You could easily get lost in the hallways and corridors. I often get lost myself, you know." She chuckled like a child several years younger than she actually was. "I can stray for days on end. People just can't find me! I still find all sorts of rooms I'd never known about before. Rooms with *such* secrets, you wouldn't believe! Still," she pirouetted round to survey the guests, "where's Sir George?"

In amongst the velociraptors, peacocks, smilodons, elands and moas dressed in

such wide diversity it just wasn't possible to distinguish a six foot tall grasshopper. Zitha grinned.

"Well, I'm sure he's found someone to talk to. He's *ever so* popular, you know! However, I'll introduce you to our guests. This gentleman is a police sergeant, aren't you?"

She addressed a tiger in a blue stiff-collared uniform. "Actually, I'm much more senior than that..." he began, but wasn't allowed to finish as Zitha introduced me in rapid succession to a minotaur who'd made a mint from futures, a salmon in a wheelchair who'd inherited the biggest underwater farm ever, a tapir who wrote ever such difficult poetry, a phoenix big in insurance, a pterodactyl who was ever such a clever professor and many others who, before I'd had the chance to properly greet them or they'd had time to elaborate on Zitha's brief and sweeping descriptions, was superseded by another whose main claim to attention was that he, she or it was next nearest in proximity.

In this way, Zitha breezed me through a succession of large muralled rooms, libraries, hallways and studies each brimming with guests engrossed in wine, drugs and conversation. As we proceeded, I encountered more interesting and fascinating individuals than I would have been exposed to in an entire lifetime in the Suburbs, saw some but not enough of magnificent paintings, statues and furniture, and heard snatches of music generated from sound systems, string quartets, jazz trios and singer-songwriters balanced on stools. In all this, my hostess was a constant provider of chat, inconsequence and distraction, but gave me no opportunity to focus my attention on anything for very long or to fully absorb my surroundings. On the way, I collected and lost glasses of wine and experienced the brief sniff, smoke and inhalation of a curious

selection of recreational drugs that Zitha insisted that I had just *got* to try. It was no wonder that I was in a state of confusion my Suburban life had never prepared me for when Zitha eventually halted in a book-filled study from which the only doors led back out in the direction from which we had come.

“So what do you know about this Party?” wondered Zitha, leaning against an enormous oak fireplace carved with an array of gruesome gargoyles.

“Only what I’ve just seen,” I answered honestly. “Is it your birthday party?”

“Goodness, no!” laughed Zitha. “I wasn’t even born when this Party began. It’s been going on for absolutely years. It’s absolutely world-famous! Are you saying in all honesty that you’ve never heard of it?”

I delved back in my memory beyond the haze of recent imbibing and inhalation to news stories or magazine articles I might have read. Perhaps things like this were just never considered newsworthy in the Suburbs, though I knew that there were several magazines that reported only the lives of the privileged and famous. “No, I really honestly haven’t!” I admitted sadly.

“My father started the Party absolutely ages ago. I think it might have been for his wedding reception, or maybe it was a housewarming party, or perhaps it was just for the sake of it. If it was a wedding party, it hasn’t dissuaded my mother divorcing him. My father lavished so much attention and expense on the Party that nobody wanted to leave the following day. Or the next day. Or the day after that. And in this way, it’s just gone on and on. And now it’s ever so famous. The Eternal Party they call it. And despite people saying that eventually my father will go broke in providing for it, and the money to pay for it has to come from somewhere, it just continues unceasingly. I guess there’s had to be some sacrifices. Employees have been laid off or

had to take pay cuts. Land has had to be sold. Subsidiaries mortgaged or floated on the stock market. But despite all the dire predictions, the Party goes on. And on. It's a jolly good Party too, don't you think?"

"It's very impressive," I admitted.

"Of course, as time goes by, the guests just demand more and more. There are films showing in the private cinemas my father had to build. There are several dancing rooms. There are orchestras, plays, circuses, duelling, feasting, sex, drugs, poetry readings and soirées galore. The meals provided each and every evening would feed several small countries. The daily bill for alcohol alone is greater than most people's annual income. This Party costs simply thousands and millions of guineas. If my father wasn't so rich, generous and dedicated to the cause of satisfying his guests, it just would never have been possible. And don't you think it's worth it? Have you *ever* been to a more splendid party in your life?"

"No, I haven't," I admitted.

"Of course, it's a bit excessive to indulge in the Party all the time. I have to go to boarding school all week, and I think my father is quite grateful to get away to do his business in the City and elsewhere. Some people just never leave, and only when they get truly obnoxious or simply disrespectful to the wrong guests are they ever obliged to go."

"Can anyone come to the Party?"

Zitha seemed visibly offended. "Goodness no! Not everyone! We wouldn't want riffraff coming. Where would the guests look if servants were admitted? Or proles. Or peasants. My goodness! Only the truly suitable are ever invited. And their friends, of course. I wouldn't want these priceless carpets covered in working class

vomit. I wouldn't like the magnums of champers to be squandered on people lacking taste and refinement. It would be a total waste! Not everyone can properly appreciate the finer things in life."

Zitha then led me out of the study and through more rooms, introducing me to yet more people. We arrived at a drawing room in which a few guests were gathered around a collection of bottles on a table. This room was really no different to any other that we'd been in except that for the first time I saw someone I recognised. The large Mouse carefully pouring a glass of mead into a tumbler, while sniffing the air with his massive nose and whiskers, was undoubtedly Tudor. He raised his head and regarded me amiably.

"Sooth, good morrow, young man," he greeted me warmly. "How dost? 'Tis most curious that we should so meet again but less than one day since!"

"Fabulous!" chuckled Zitha. "You know each other. I don't have to introduce you."

"'Tis verily so! 'Twas at a railway station many leagues distant that we met. This young man hath travelled far from the Suburbs where he doth abide."

"The Suburbs! How absolutely fantastic! You know, I've never been there. I've heard it's a pretty wacky place." Zitha giggled. "But tell me Tudor, are you travelling by train now? That's most terrifically adventurous of you!"

"'Twas not by choice, thou canst be assured," the Mouse remarked, lowering the warm tumbler of mead from his muzzle. "'Tis an adventure in discomfort and indignity. And thee? Thy Party continueth unabated?"

"As ever. And you've always been one of those pessimists who said it just couldn't last forever..."

Tudor laughed indulgently, twitching the muscles of his nose and ears. "'Tis but the way of the world. All things and all events have their season. Winter shalt come nigh ere long, and the Party shalt be a mere memory to all those who have known't."

"So enjoy it while you can!" chortled the girl removing her hat and brushing her fingers through the long dense curls. "We're all going to die in the end, so we might as well get as much pleasure out of life as we possibly can."

"Thou'rt most frivolous..."

"Well, I can't spend forever talking philosophy," Zitha laughed, replacing the hat on her head. "I've got other guests to gossip with. Enjoy!" With that she swept through the assorted guests greeting each of them decorously and briefly. Tudor gazed after her as she departed.

"The Party shalt end one day," he repeated. "All Parties must end. And in but two days from now, the party represented by the Coition Government shalt also come to its end. 'Twill be a sad day for those who have benefited from the too many decades of the chaos, incompetence and corruption that hath so much distinguished the realm. In a land riven by discord and disorganisation, 'tis but the lowlife and the Devil they serve who hath triumphed. Mine dread, however, ist that rather than peace and tranquillity, the General Election shalt result in naught but worse anarchy. We stand perilously nigh to the brink of civilisation's collapse, and 'twill take but the merest nudge for all to fall."

"That *is* a pessimistic view!"

"Perchance 'tis so. But for too long there hath been overmuch license: Satan and his minions march the land. Vile sins art practised: pornography, blasphemy, paganism and disrespect. Each person in this land believeth that he and he alone hath

the knowledge and wisdom to govern this once proud nation, willing to take the real power once the sole possession of Her Maphrodite. The only solution to this nation's great woes must be a return to traditional values and principles once held so dear."

"What are those?" I inquired, having often heard similar opinions voiced in the Suburbs.

"Less license and more respect." He paused to pour himself more mead while the distant rhythm of salsa thundered from several rooms away. A tiger in an expensive suit was collapsed outstretched on the floor with a bottle of wine in one hand, a cigar in the other and vomit stains on his silk shirt. I returned my gaze to Tudor who was holding a raw fish in his red-gloved claws which he was about to drop down his long muzzle. He glanced at me with his large round eyes, and then with a rapid movement of jaws and tongue the whole fish was gulped down his gullet.

He belched appreciatively. "Mine host: he ist the most generous of men! There is naught in the dominion of entertainment or diversion that hath not been relished at this Party. 'Tis oft I return for pleasure and relaxation. Food and drink most plentiful. The company for the most part pleasing and comely. But in all this cornucopia and generosity, which 'twere most ungrateful not to shower praise on't, I fear there ist a moral which reflects the greater waste and irresponsibility of this land. Nevertheless, 'tis by the industry of our host that all this is possible. 'Tis not achieved by theft nor smuggling nor murder. In that 'tis justified. And 'tis a most splendid mansion, i'sooth!"

"Yes, it is," I agreed, ogling the enormous paintings that lined the walls between tall bookcases and alongside the most exquisite leather-covered furniture. There were paintings featuring horses and hounds chasing foxes, dogs tearing birds apart with their jaws, fish being snared in fish-hooks, and gentlemen proudly displaying

a shotgun with one hand and a batch of dead pheasants with the other.

“’Tis most civilised,” Tudor continued, picking at the salmon canapés and the small sausages on little wooden spears. “But tell me, young man, where goest thou?”

“I’m not absolutely sure. I was escorted here and I haven’t decided where to go next.”

“Thou’rt a traveller, art thou not? Far from the exotic Suburbs. Dost intend to rest here?”

“I’m not sure. I feel tempted never to leave.”

“Hah!” laughed the Mouse, his whiskers and ears twitching madly. “Thou wouldst not be the first to succumb to the easy pleasures of the Party. Many come willingly and few leave, so ’tis said. But it hath been related that although there be great pleasure in the Party there ist but little purpose. Perchance if thou wishest to be enticed away from here, I canst offer thee one night at mine own castle.”

“Could you?” I asked, perhaps manifesting my enthusiasm a little too strongly, but as I hadn’t had a satisfactory sleep the night before I was attracted to the prospect of sleeping in a comfortable bed. I was also aware that I was unlikely to find the Truth in amongst all this jollity unless, (and the thought slightly unsettled me), this was all the Truth I was ever likely to find.

“’Tis but a humble abode, but I trow ’tis but my duty as a good Christian to extend mine hospitality to thee. I shalt be departing within the hour.” Tudor sniffed. “Now, if thou canst but await and forgive my rudeness, I have business elsewhere. But thou needst not feel abandoned, for here I see again is our hostess, the beauteous Zitha.”

Tudor strode out of the drawing room, his long scaly tail and the sheath of his

sword trailing behind him. He passed Zitha as she entered and the two briefly exchanged pleasantries. The girl had changed into a green silk blouse, long pearl beads and baggy trousers. She now wore a small bright blue beret almost totally lost in the abundance of her curls.

“Why hello, you silly Suburbanite,” she giggled. “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes, very nice,” I assented, sipping from a wine glass.

“Well, don’t hesitate to eat anything. Caviar, lemon sole, fresh trout, angel fish, it’s all here! Our chefs are amongst the very best, you know. And there are perfect feasts served in the dining rooms later! There are some films showing. Some jolly risqué ones too, I believe! Don’t forget, all this is here for *your* benefit. I’ll be most offended if you don’t thoroughly indulge yourself.”

“Why thank you,” I replied, not feeling at all hungry, but nonetheless I politely nibbled on some caviar coated wafers.

Zitha scanned the assorted company. “I see Tudor’s abandoned you. I don’t like to see a single guest deserted like this. Shall I introduce you to the Cat Ambassador? He’s a jolly interesting chap!” She twirled around and gestured towards a Cat, about the same size as me sporting the most flamboyant clothes, adorned with lace and buckles, a sheathed sword like Tudor’s hanging from a belt around his waist and carrying a large broad-brimmed hat with an enormous feather in his white gloved paw. His other ungloved paw clutched a large fish whose head he’d already devoured. “How are you, Ambassador?”

“I’m fine. Fine!” purred the cat, swallowing the whole of the fish with a single drop down his gullet, his whiskers twitching with delight. “As always, the food here is

absolutely delicious. My compliments to your chefs. And who is this gentleman?"

"He comes from the Suburbs. Have you heard of it?"

"The Suburbs? I'm not familiar with all the parts of your fascinating land, but I'm sure it is another borough I would have great pleasure in visiting." He picked up a glass of wine, raised it to his mouth and decorously sipped from it. "Is it far from here?"

"It's a very long way," I replied. "And very different. There are cats there, but I've never met one dressed as gloriously as you."

"Indeed, no. Your indigenous Cats seem to have little taste or style, I deem." He addressed Zitha. "Tell me, has your father reserved a room for me for the night?"

"Of course, Ambassador. The usual ambassadorial suite. We've kept you as far away as possible from any Canine guests who might be staying here..."

The Cat shuddered. "That is most thoughtful of you!"

"...And I'm sure you'll find that it has every luxury you require. However, if you could excuse me, I have another guest to see to!" She smiled apologetically and strode over to the tiger who'd earlier been stretched on the floor but was now leaning unsteadily on the mantelpiece with a glass of wine in one paw and the other struggling to keep himself upright. Zitha floated to his side and chattered to him oblivious of his inebriation.

"So, young man," asked the Ambassador solicitously, "do you know many of the other guests at this party?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I was brought here by someone who I appear to have lost. But I have met someone I know. Tudor, he's called."

"Tudor?" mused the Cat. "That's a Mouse name isn't it?"

“I suppose it must be. Tudor was the Mouse in here just a moment ago...”

“And I daresay he had some very unflattering things to say about Cats. Mice are so Anti-Feline! They have no understanding or appreciation of the Feline cause, and constantly bemoan the fact that to bring civilisation to their so-called motherland it’s been necessary to also bring them the benefits of Feline Government. These Mice are *so* ungrateful! Do they *really* believe they’d be better off if they were under the yoke of a Canine Republic?”

“Is that what Mice want?”

“Well, they call it self-determination. But how can Mice be capable of running a country by themselves? They’ve proved to be a damnably unruly and uncooperative lot in the Cat Kingdom. The only way they could possibly take over in what they misguidedly call their ancestral home is by mortgaging themselves to the wealthier Dogs. And I’ve yet to see evidence that Dogs have anything like the standards of good government and tolerance evinced by us felines!”

“Is there some dispute about sovereignty in the Cat Kingdom?” I asked.

The Ambassador mewed. “You could say that!” He picked up another fish and dropped it down his throat. His furry throat convulsed briefly as it descended down his oesophagus. “It’s a fairly meaningless dispute because there really is no case for the land to be anything other than Feline. As has been agreed by the international community which mostly recognises the sovereignty of His Majesty the King. Only the damnable Canine Republics and a few Mouse-sympathisers withhold their recognition, not that it ever prevents them trading with us. After so many years of Feline Diaspora in which Cats have been denied a nation of their own, forced to rely on the open hearth and generosity of northern neighbours, we have at last attained our historical homeland

for which our rights by historical primacy cannot be seriously denied. We imagined we would finally see an end to the persecution that has hounded us over the millennia from the Canine scourge, the false accusations of witchcraft and the compulsory sequestering of our hard-earned wealth by whatever complexion of government has envied it. Even now there are those whose claims on our land being so much more recent are judged somehow to be the stronger as a result.”

“Is it only because you’re Cats that some people do not like you?” I wondered, remembering Tudor’s intense dislike.

“I daresay that for most of our enemies it is quite simply that we are Cats they discriminate against us. They call us foul abusive epithets such as *Pussy* and *Moggy*. They mock our purring as growls and our tail-wagging as perverse. They are just envious of our arboreal and hunting skills, our nimbleness and adaptability, and our ability to see in the dark. However, that’s not the professed reasons our enemies give for their enmity. Many pretend that it is distaste for our system of government in which the King has prime political power. The Canine Republics in particular oppose our model of government as archaic, arbitrary and unfair. They ask how a Cat can be endowed with the Divine Right to rule. However, surely hereditary government, vested in one trained and tutored from birth in the arts of government, is better than power which falls so arbitrarily into the hands of petty dictators, as in so many of the Canine Republics, who might even have originally taken power by democratic means, but more often in a *coup d’état*, usually with the unfulfilled pretext of restoring democracy. And few of these petty dictators relinquish power, often bequeathing it to close relatives or their own puppies. Moreover, the Divine Right of the King to rule is bound deeply with the religious practices of feline kind. The King is both the spiritual and

temporal leader of the realm. He defends both sovereignty and the faith. No Canine dictator can pretend to responsibilities as grave, however much they may bark on about the Bible and religion.”

“Does the Cat Kingdom get on with the Canine Republics?”

“Not in the slightest. We’re constantly at war with one Dog Republic or another. It’s a great strain on our economy, but the wealth of Cats throughout the world has ensured that this is a fight the Dogs can never win. Whatever the complexion of dog - spaniel, terrier, poodle, collie or whatever - the Dog is too disorganised and stupid to do more than merely harry and unsettle our nation. These Dogs don’t have the political stability or historical traditions to compete with Cats. They dress like undertakers, forever preaching about God and Duty, live lives of unspeakable drabness and are just too incredibly diverse in kind. The Dog is a racial mess. When you look at a Cat, you know it’s a Cat. We’re all about the same shape and size, differing only in details like colour and length of fur. What can be said about an Animal of the mongrel varieties of Chihuahuas, Rottweilers, Pekinese, Daschunds, Doberman Pinschers and bulldogs? They’re just a mess!”

“Who wins these wars with the Canine Republics?”

“Why, us of course. The Cat Kingdom! Who else? As we have always done. As we are destined to always do. It is our right and duty to triumph. It’s not that we have any designs on the land of our neighbours, although we have been reluctantly obliged to occupy some of their land as guarantees of territorial security. We don’t want our nation overrun by a host of poodles, corgis or pit bull terriers. We’re quite happy to leave the Dogs where they are, - and only ask that they display the same magnanimity to us. And to stop going on so much about these accursed Mice. If they’re that

enamoured by rodents why don't they welcome them more in their own territories."

"Still talking?" asked Zitha who had unexpectedly returned. She had changed yet again: this time into a long black dress with a very high collar and another wide hat. The tiger she'd been talking to had vanished, leaving only a pool of vomit and fish-bones where he'd been slumped. "You must circulate, Ambassador! There are many more guests to see. And you, as well, you must meet a few more guests."

"Actually I'm waiting for Tudor to return. He said he'd let me stay at his castle."

"Did he?" laughed Zitha. "That's jolly generous of him. But I wouldn't expect him to return while you're chatting to a Cat. The Mouse probably thinks His Excellency would like to tear him apart for sport or something like that."

"The Feline reputation for wanton cruelty is much exaggerated," mewed the Ambassador.

"I'm sure it is," agreed Zitha. "But if you could excuse us please, Your Excellency, we'll search for this gentleman's companion. There are a number of other ambassadors in the main dining room, if you would wish to join them."

"Thank you for your advice," the Cat replied, nonetheless remaining around the fish dinners that were laid out for guests, while Zitha led me on out of the drawing room, an arm locked through mine. We passed a veritable scrum of guests milling about outside rooms lit by red lights for which Zitha gave no explanation. We passed a darkened room, where a number of guests lay collapsed on cushions smoking from a large hookah-pipe appended to an ornate glass bowl. We trod over inebriated guests, including the tiger who had somehow negotiated his way along several corridors only to collapse in another stupor with many clothes now inexplicably absent. As we

walked, Zitha chatted on about how the weather had been particularly warm recently, but looked like it might soon be on the turn; how she hoped that whoever won the General Election wouldn't in any way spoil the fun of the Party by excessive taxation; how she wondered at the dietary tastes and dining habits of several guests as we passed a pile of empty snail shells, fish-bones and hay; and how she hoped that I was enjoying her father's Party.

"Well," wondered Zitha. "What is it that takes you so far from the Suburbs? We get *very* few people from *that* borough coming to this Party."

I explained to her about my search for the Truth as we walked through a library in which books were stacked high up to the ceiling. "The Truth!" she exclaimed. "We get many guests here with the most bizarre ambitions. Eternal Peace. Love and Death. The Kingdom of God. But never one before with a quest to find the Truth. This is really, I'd have thought, the very last place in the world I'd visit if I were searching for the Truth. *I've* never come across it here. We've got everything else you might look for, and I'm sure there are plenty of books in this library on the subject. Not that anyone ever reads them! Did you *seriously* believe you'd find the Truth at my father's Party?"

"I don't really know where to look," I admitted. "When I was invited here I thought I might find some clues as to its whereabouts."

"There are certainly a lot of guests here who'd say they could advise you. Some of the best minds in the world come to this Party. *That* I know! But I can't believe that even the brainiest or wisest or most widely travelled can really claim to know what the Truth is or where to find it. Quite honestly, I don't know why anyone would ever bother."

“Why’s that?”

Zitha paused by a globe of the world standing on a desk. She put a hand on it and theatrically spun it round. The continents and oceans passed by caged in by lines representing latitude, longitude and the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. “Why bother? There are so many much more fun things to do in life. Look at the Party. It’s been going on and on, all in the pursuit of pleasure. And however hard it is pursued, there is yet more pleasure to be found. And aren’t there absolutely loads of people who say that the purpose of life is to find happiness? And, if that’s the case, isn’t there just a fantastic amount of happiness to be found here? Look at everyone! Aren’t they happy? And is there really anything else you’d want in life?”

I looked around at the company which included a very drunken yale chatting to a hippogriff, a couple of aardvarks smoking reefers underneath the collected works of the Marquis de Sade, a canoodling pair of pygmy chimpanzees on the top of a bookcase, a wolf chatting amiably with a protoceratops, and a large hare slumped unconscious on a leather chair. Everyone certainly seemed happy, but I felt sure that this apparent happiness was not the Truth I was looking for.

“Life is for the living!” continued Zitha. “We’re only on this planet for a few years and then we die. It could all end tomorrow. And what regrets we’d all have if we knew on our deathbed there were so many pleasures we’d not indulged in. Culinary delights uneaten. Alcohol unimbibed. Partners denied. Plays, films or video games not enjoyed. How can there be anything more to life than living it to the full? And where can life be enjoyed more to the full than here?”

“I’m sure that there are no pleasures in the world that aren’t catered for at this Party,” I agreed.

“Absolutely right! And the only struggle I think worth making is to find new ways to enjoy them. And to find new exotic and unexplored pleasures. These are the challenges that face every dedicated hedonist. My father struggles night and day, taking the advice of the greatest experts, to provide pleasures for all: however bizarre, perverse, cruel or refined. There is no pleasure he would hesitate to provide: from virtual sex, from blood-sports, from lively and witty conversation, from meditation, to whatever else our insatiable guests may demand. And in this pursuit of pleasure there are undoubtedly victims, but ultimately isn’t their sacrifice worth the greater pleasure of those fortunate enough to be guests at this, the ultimate and eternal Party?”

“Are there casualties amongst the guests, though?” I asked, considering the unhealthy state of several of them, such as the tiger Zitha had been ministering to.

“In any great pursuit there are martyrs to the cause,” mused Zitha, folding her arms and frowning. “Drug Addiction. Venereal Disease. Lethargy. Lung Cancer. Bankruptcy. Insanity. Delusion. Liver Disease. But it’ll all have been worthwhile if the pleasure gained in acquiring these maladies outweighs the long term pain and degradation.”

“I sooth!” came Tudor’s familiar voice. “Thou’rt being most uncharacteristically philosophical, Zitha. Nay, thou’rt nigh metaphysical in thy discourse!” The Mouse stood by us, supporting his weight on the table where the globe was slowly losing the momentum of its earlier rapid spin.

“It’s the influence of your Suburban friend!” laughed Zitha, as if she’d been discovered doing something she wasn’t permitted. “He’s got the *most* bizarre notions!”

“’Swounds! I little ken the Suburbs, but ne’er hath I heard it described as the home of metaphysics or high discourse. ’Tis oft spoken as a place bereft of all great

thought, immersed only in its own perfection, imposing little on the world beyond and intent only on the provision of amateur dramatics, local history societies and supermarkets.”

“It sounds *absolutely* bizarre!” mused Zitha. “There *are* places outside the pages of literature and the situation comedy living room which engross themselves in such things. I thought it was all a myth to make everyone feel jolly smug that their lives were tons more exciting.”

“I know not,” admitted Tudor. “Perchance, young man, thou canst impart details of thy home unto us. Is’t so ‘tis but a land of small concerns and, yea, smaller ambitions?”

“I don’t know how best to describe it,” I admitted. “It’s very different to here. Or anywhere else I’ve visited recently.”

“Mayhap ’tis true!” sniffed the Mouse, scratching his muzzle with a gloved claw. “But now, dearest Zitha, ’tis time, I trow, for mine friend and I to depart. ’Tis as ever with the greatest regret that I do so.”

“And I don’t imagine it’ll be too long till you come back!” giggled the young girl.

“I sooth!” agreed Tudor, before ushering me through the mass of guests to the main hallway which was far further away than I’d imagined. We passed all conceivable species of guests along opulent corridors, past defunct mediæval armour, Ming vases, tall and imposing portraits of Zitha’s ancestors, videophones, Hogarth cartoons, the heads of slaughtered deer and foxes, velvet curtains and finally the wide expanse of the staircase in the main hallway.

Tudor’s carriage was waiting outside amongst a fleet of Mercedes, Rolls-

Royces, Porsches and Bentleys. It was quite modest in comparison, being an open-top horse-drawn carriage, although the armour-covered horses were magnificent and the carriage stout and resplendent.

“’Tis but a few leagues until mine estate!” announced the Mouse as his chauffeur cracked his whip and the horses thundered off away from the mansion house. It was several furlongs until we passed through the garden gates past long avenues bordered by grand statues of all examples of exotic and extinct fauna.

7

Evening descended as Tudor's carriage passed over the drawbridge to his castle and parked inside its dark grey walls. Within his walls, as without, there was considerable evidence of the Mouse's wealth in the form of fishponds, ornate hedges and enormous rosebushes. Several of Tudor's servants, all hares in livery, gathered to greet us when we arrived. One hare in dark clothes, a ruff about his neck only slightly less magnificent than Tudor's own, came directly to the carriage to welcome his master.

"I hope 'twas a day of great success for thee, sire," he asked obsequiously.

"Indeed, 'twas. Only a malign election result shalt deprive me of mine just desert. I have with me another guest," Tudor indicated me, "so I shalt expect a chamber prepared and a place ready for him at mine table."

"'Twill be done, sire," the hare replied, conducting us through a giant oak doorway into the main hallway of the castle. "'Tis salmon and trout on the menu this evening."

"And much mead I trust?" Tudor asked while his servant removed the belt holding his sheathed sword and held it respectfully in his paws.

"As ever, sire."

I was impressed by the expansive hallway lit by great wax candles in a giant chandelier above our heads. All around were portraits of illustrious looking Mice posing with swords and horses framed by extensive estates populated by all kinds of livestock. Two suits of armour stood to attention at the foot of a wide oak staircase. Even through the soles of my shoes, however, the stone floor felt very cold, and

although it was not a cold day the air was distinctly chilly inside the castle's walls.

"Thou hast another guest, sire," the hare continued, one of his long ears foppishly drooping. "'Tis Hubert. He arrived unannounced this morn, and when I saidst that thou wert abroad he declared he wouldst await thee."

"Hubert! 'Tis many a morrow sin last we met. Thou didst well to let him stay. But sooth didst he perchance relate why he hath come?"

"Nay, sire. But I woot 'tis as ever in his quest for the Great Bard."

"As incorrigible as e'er!" laughed the Mouse. He gestured to me. "Come, 'tis time to dine. Mine modest banqueting hall awaits."

It might well have been modest compared to the opulent surroundings in which we'd met earlier in the afternoon, but it was still a very large room compared to any to be found in a Suburban house. A long oak table extended the length of it, on which was a comprehensive collection of crockery, cutlery and unopened bottles of wine and mead.

In a large leather chair below another portrait of a proud Mouse, sat the figure of an enormous teddy bear more than seven foot tall, wearing a long green waistcoat, a frock coat through the sleeves of which protruded the lace cuffs of his shirt and grey silk tights which just about squeezed around his tubular legs. His paws held a large green tri-cornered hat on his lap. He gazed at us through bright button eyes and as he twitched his nose I could see the stitching in his fur.

"Good evening, Tudor. I hope you don't mind me intruding on your hospitality like this," he announced, lifting himself up and strolling towards us.

"Not at all, Hubert. Nay, the pleasure, 'tis indeed mine to receive thee once more. Thy quest for perfect poetry hath brought thee here once more?"

“It has indeed! I seem to ever gravitate towards your castle in my quest for the works of the Great Bard. But who is your charming friend?”

“He hath come from the Suburbs. I met him on a train yesterday, and again today at the Party...”

“On a train! I would never imagine you’d ever contemplate such an uncomfortable means of travel! And, you, young man. You come from the Suburbs. Why! I was there just two days ago! From what I saw of that place, I am *extremely* surprised to see someone from there in such a place as Tudor’s castle.”

“Thou wert in the Suburbs? Thou dost greatly amaze me! Trowest thou that the Great Bard abided there?”

“I have so heard,” Hubert admitted. “But there is naught for me there I confess. The relics of the Poet have been greatly obscured by municipal statues and supermarkets. But let’s speak no more of that for I see that the first course is arriving.”

Two hares dressed in tights, breeches and modest ruffs carried in large platters of fish. They were placed on the end of the table, where we were to sit, with Tudor at the head in a splendid high-backed chair, and Hubert and I on chairs to either side and facing each other. My chair was quite hard and rather too large, while Hubert must have found his chair uncomfortably small for his substantial bulk. The servants placed carved portions of salmon on our platters with the fishes’ eyes staring reprovingly up.

“It’s not at all long ’til the General Election,” began the large teddy bear, choosing this topic as a means of stimulating conversation. “The day after next, I think.”

“I sooth! ’Tis so,” replied Tudor carving his salmon with expert ease, while I was having great difficulty in separating the bones from the flesh. “’Twill be

momentous, I trow, howsoe'er 'tis resolved."

"I'm sure you don't agree with me, Tudor, because I know what an old reactionary you are, but my hopes are on the White Party winning this Election."

"The White Party!" snorted the Mouse disdainfully. "Thou hast stayed too long in the Suburbs, i'truth! Thou wouldst advocate a government of no principles, no ideology, and no beliefs. The Party of compromise and dithering."

"That's exactly why the White Party wins my vote," Hubert said pushing a forkful of fish into the dark lines of his mouth. "What this country needs is a government of consensus. Not one which pursues an agenda of its own design and oppresses the interests of others. Not a party like the Black Party who'd lynch Cats and other foreigners. Not one like the Red Party who'd increase our taxes. Nor one such as the Blue Party which would neglect the interests of the poor. No. What is needed is a party which pursues the golden mean. Neither right nor left. Neither capitalist nor communist. Neither catholic nor Protestant. Neither religious nor irreligious...."

"In short, Hubert, thou advocatest a government of pusillanimity and uncertainty. Thou wouldst desire government more for short term convenience than long term strategy. A government that doth naught that might ere disconsole the smooth order of life."

"You're quite right, Tudor, if a bit facetious."

"Then, Hubert, answer me this. Why 'tis thought needful for this General Election which shalt result in but one Party governing our great nation, when thou believest that government shouldst continue to be run by the consensus, dithering and delay that hath so long characterised it? Wouldst it better be 'twere all to stay as 'tis?"

“You may scoff, Hubert, but I do think that would be somewhat preferable to government by any of the other five Parties contesting the Election. If you consider the Suburbs, where the White Party has been in effective power from the beginning, you must confess that there is order, contentment, prosperity and peace. It is there that you will see the nearest to perfect government that currently exists in this land.”

Before Tudor could rebut Hubert’s reply, the servants breezed in, cleared away what was left of the first course, and lay another meat dish on the table that appeared to be rabbit or some other lagomorph. One hare, somewhat larger than the others, took slices from the carcass and placed them on new plates along with roast turnips, swede and parsnips. Hubert smiled appreciatively at his host while he took a forkful of white meat into his mouth.

“Tell me,” pursued Tudor directing the conversation into uncontroversial territory. “How doth thy quest for the Great Bard for which thou hast travelled to such exotic boroughs as the Suburbs?”

“It continues, as ever, to exhume more of the legacy this great man has left. I have yet to find an authenticated tombstone nor indeed proof positive of his birth-place but I seek still and will persevere...”

“Until when? What is’t thou seekest?”

“If I didn’t know you better, Tudor, I would have thought you a philistine. The quest for Great Art is an end in itself. Its discovery is a mere trophy of one’s endeavours.”

“Great Art ist worth but three farthings if ’twere for the sole pleasure of the æsthete.”

“Now, you *are* being facetious. Art is necessarily for all, though there are those

of undoubtedly greater æsthetic sensibilities than others. This is just and fitting. The poet evokes images of great profundity in daffodils, roses, fish and wedding parties. He informs us of our condition and advises how best to advance on it. And so it follows that the greatest of poets must be the greatest of all creation, and that man is incontrovertibly the Great Bard.”

“Thou must needs forgive me, Hubert, for the very ignorance that thou dost deride, but I little grasp the greatness of poetry. Thou canst not live in it. Thou canst not eat it. And thou dost not become rich by possessing it.”

“Again I must beg to disagree. One most certainly does become rich in the possession of poetry.”

“And I woot a very conceited lot these poets art! Why, Hubert, shouldst I heed these petty scholars who hath lived little and gained but little wealth?”

“Are you never affected by the wit and wisdom of poets who take any issue, however improbable, and in a few apt words persuade us to behold it anew?”

Before Tudor could challenge Hubert, the hares returned to remove what was left of the main course and to replace it with a selection of cakes, fruit, biscuits and cheese. They also brought in a bottle of brandy from which Tudor took great pleasure in pouring us all a drink. He picked up a glass in his claw and sniffed it with his long nose while his whiskers twitched agitatedly. As if satisfied by the smell he swallowed the contents entire and poured himself another glass.

“How was the Party, Tudor?” wondered Hubert, decorously brushing the crumbs of cake from the corner of his mouth with a serviette.

“As ever,” sniffed the Mouse absently. “’Twouldst be better an ’twere not for the presence of the Cat Ambassador. That the host canst be so persuaded to invite a

Cat to his Party illustrateth, wert demonstration required, the malign influence of the Cat in our society.”

“I’m sure he was present more on account of his being an Ambassador than of being a Cat,” commented the teddy bear diplomatically.

“Thou’rt too liberal in thy views!” exclaimed the Mouse. “A Cat ist a Cat, and as such ist innately damned. This Ambassador was disseminating his malign propaganda at the Party, and was dressed in such immodest and vulgar opulence that shouldst excite repugnance in all good Christian souls.”

“You really don’t like Cats, do you?”

“Wouldst thou, wert thou a Mouse? Mine kind hath been attended shamefully by Cats. I feel naught but sympathy for the Mouse Liberation Organisation and Canine Freedom Fighters who struggle against Feline oppression. ’Tis oft claimed by the Cats that they art the victims of racism and intolerance, but ’tis a hollow claim when thou knowest the discrimination practised against Mice in the Cat Kingdom who art denied expression in their own language and the rights of plebiscite and representation, and whose land ist oft stolen by so-called Feline Settlers. How canst the Cat deserve respect when he depriveth other species of theirs?”

“So you approve of the extreme behaviour of Rodent and Canine terrorists who blow up aeroplanes, hijack buses, gun down civilians, explode monuments and bandstands, and consign their own districts to a constant atmosphere of fear and distrust.”

“Is’t unlike the terrorism executed by Cats by which they acquired the ancestral homes of millions of Mice and Dogs? Plainly, I wouldst defend those who by active or passive means art employed in reversing the wrongs the Cat hath wrought. And thou’rt

mistaken - a thousand times so - when thou sayest that the struggle ist entirely engaged by the terrorist. In the Cat Kingdom there art many who refuse to patronise Feline premises, to pay taxes to the Feline oppressors or to bow down to the tyrannical rule of the Feline King. They art engaged in a struggle that hath oft cost them their lives.”

“I don’t believe that it’s at all inconsistent for me to be sympathetic to that kind of protest and somewhat less so to the terrorism of more militant individuals,” argued Hubert. “And furthermore I am a little disquieted by the notion of the Dogs becoming a greater influence in the region. Some of the Canine Republics are decidedly unpleasant not only in the way they treat Cats, but even other kinds of Dogs.”

“Necessity maketh strange bed-fellows,” agreed the Mouse. “I wouldst not wish the independent nation of Mice when it ariseth from the ashes of the Cat Kingdom to emulate the dictatorships and theocracies of the Canine Republics. I’sooth, I wouldst not wish Mice to be bound to Calvinist, Baptist or Evangelist dogma as the Basset Hound Republic or the Republic of Cocker Spaniels. ’Tis true that I wouldst be an unlikely advocate for temperance and I have but little patience with those who forever quote from the Bible. And I wouldst not wish the future Nation of Mice to be governed by such military rulers as those of the Labrador, Collie or Whippet Republics. But I believe not that these nations shalt be the model for the future Mouse nation.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” commented Hubert diplomatically, poking at the inside of his mouth with a tooth-pick. “I was merely expressing reservation about the use of violence to attain the ends you believe in.”

“’Tis immaterial. The struggle ist one which shalt continue by fair means or foul. And one in which my bank account ist much committed. However, my friends,

shalt we retire to the smoking room?"

"A splendid suggestion, my good Mouse!" agreed the teddy bear, heaving up his immense weight and then, clearly familiar with the layout of Tudor's castle, leading the way through the immense oak doors to the adjoining room, in which the servants had already prepared a fire. As we left the dining room, the servants bound in and began tidying up the remains of our meal.

The smoking room was aptly named as it possessed a very strong smell of tobacco which clung to the leather furniture and wallpaper, and had discoloured the ceiling with a pronounced yellowish stain. We reclined in comfortable upholstered chairs and sofas set around the fire which emitted most of the light in the otherwise gloomy room. Portraits of Tudor's ancestors lined the wall beyond the shadows cast by the fire. In front of us stood a low oaken table on which there was more mead and wine, and, appropriately for the room, a collection of long clay pipes, loose tobacco and spills. Tudor and Hubert went through the rituals of piling tobacco into the pipes and puffing away at them to keep them alight. In no time the room was full of a thick sweet-smelling odour that saturated my eyes and throat and made me feel distinctly unwell.

Tudor took a long draw from his pipe and exhaled a long twisting cloud of smoke. "Tell me, young man," he asked. "Why is't thou hast departed the Suburbs and voyaged here?"

"My impression from my stay in the Suburbs," Hubert added, "is that for the natives to venture anywhere beyond the borough's confines is considered hazardous. The people I spoke to had very disapproving opinions about the rest of the country, or indeed the rest of the world. It was almost as if they'd never seen a seven foot tall

teddy bear in a tri-corned hat before.”

I explained to Tudor that I had left the Suburbs on a quest for the Truth which I believed could only be found elsewhere. “It seemed well worth the effort of leaving home.”

“I’sooth, in comparison to Hubert’s quest for the Great Poet ’tis incontestable that thy quest seems a nobler thing by far. Few who wouldst question the need to seek out and peruse all the Great Poet hath writ, spake or thought wouldst quibble at the relative nobility of the Truth. But I wouldst disagree with thee that thy search is the wiser or more advisable. The very nature of thy quest suggesteth that the Truth canst be found in a material or physical form. I wouldst avow that the Truth ist of a spiritual nature that canst be attained only by total immersion in philosophy, religion and contemplation. Moreo’er, thy quest conflicteth with the Truth revealed in the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ who hath suffered, died and been resurrected to spare us the need of similar discomfort to save our souls.”

“Religious objections like that are most untypical of you, Tudor,” laughed Hubert. “I don’t doubt the sincerity of your Christian beliefs, but surely you wouldn’t deny our young Suburbanite credit in an equally sincere search for the Truth. Perhaps it will lead him eventually to conclude that the Truth does in fact lie in the Christian religion.”

“I ken thee too well, Hubert, to accept that thou affordest the Word of the Lord with the least respect. ’Tis known that thou’rt a damnable atheist and thou no more think our young man shalt find the Truth in the Christian faith than in a tureen of sushi.”

“Tudor! You misrepresent me most cruelly! I am no atheist, as you claim. I am

a doubter. A skeptic. I believe that the Truth cannot be known and that the best that one can hope for is a greater approximation of knowledge of the Truth. Who am I to say that the Truth won't after all be substantiated as manifest in the Holy Gospels? I hope that I am not too arrogant to immediately doubt such a proposition. I would just say that I entertain great doubts as to whether this will be the case."

"Thou mayest not know the Truth, Hubert, but I trow that thou hast thy own opinions as to what the Truth mightst be."

"It's true that I have opinions, but I wouldn't be a skeptic if I didn't say that they are mere speculation. It could well be that your views, or the views of Cats, or the views of your lapin servants, are the ones which are in actual fact a closer representation of the Truth. My belief is that the Truth is the insight that one sees in just a flash of recognition in the expression of great Poetry. It is in the wit, wisdom, conceits, epiphanies and revelations that Poetry delivers. The Truth is in the most perfect Haiku, the most devastating Sonnet, the most expressive pentameter and the most scathing of dismissive satire. The pursuit of Truth is not a pursuit of a thing that can be held, examined or dissected; but is in fact to be found in the greater and more exact expression and statement of itself."

Tudor puffed silently at his clay pipe. His whiskers twitched with their usual agitation and he blinked his massive eyes to avoid the smoke. "From what thou sayest, I wouldst deem that thou believest that the Truth hath been already found, with which I wouldst agree, and that the Truth ist to be revealed by great insights made by the properly qualified. In this we art agreed. Howe'er, I trow that the Truth ist revealed not by Poets who but claim to spiritual, moral and æsthetic wisdom, but in those who at the pulpit of the church hath truer claims than any poet to wisdom and knowledge

which hath the affirmation of the Truth, and that which hath come on high from God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”

“I would never dream of being as specific as that,” Hubert contended, putting down the glass of mead he’d been drinking. “The Truth I’m sure is a single monistic thing of many aspects, of which the Poets have illuminated just some. Poetry constantly strives towards a greater and more accurate expression of that simple undoubted Truth. When it has finally expressed the Truth in all of its potential manifestations then it could be said that it has been found.”

“Thou hast indeed a very grand notion of the profession of Poetry,” laughed the Mouse. “I wouldst agree with thee, if ’twere not commonly known that the majority of Poetry, e’en that scribbled by thy Great Bard, hath no content of Truth in’t at all. ’Tis but humour, scurrility, conversation, digression and indulgence...”

“But these too are aspects of the Truth!” insisted the teddy bear.

“’Tis all frivolity!” concluded the Mouse, tapping out the ashes of his clay pipe into the open fire. “Now ’tis time for ye to be shown your rooms for the night.”

Tudor then escorted us around the castle, which was very dark and quite cool in the late evening. It was difficult to be sure of my tread as I followed Hubert and he up the dark shadows of the oak stair-case and along wooden corridors that creaked ominously under the heavy weight of the giant teddy bear’s footsteps.

My bedroom was a room somewhat larger than the one I had in the Suburbs and in many ways very luxurious. There was a large log fire blazing in the room which a hare was diligently priming when we put our heads through the door. There were some very expensive furnishings, some very valuable paintings, beautiful oriental wallpaper featuring fishermen and fish, and the most ornate wood panelling. But there

was no electric light switch and I had to snuff out a candle with a curious metal spoon. The four-poster bed had a very hard mattress and was evidently designed for people that at their very tallest would have been Tudor's size (and was most certainly not designed for people of Hubert's dimensions). And despite the fire which undoubtedly heated one seventh of the room, the remaining six-sevenths of the room remained inexplicably cold. But I was very tired and after I'd crawled under the several heavy woollen blankets that weighed down the bed I was soon able to escape to my own dream Arcadia.

8

The following morning I was awakened by a hare who offered to dress me before I joined his master and companions for breakfast. As I had great doubts that an animal substantially shorter than I and significantly less dextrous would dress me quite as well as I could, I declined the offer and waited until he had left the bedroom until I pulled my feet free from the confines of the sheets onto the floor several feet below. I grimaced at the sudden cold pang of the stone floor and got dressed on the luxurious carpet in front of the fire.

I then stole out of the bedroom tried to find where breakfast was served. I looked up and down the long passageways at the suits of armour, the portraits of illustrious rodents and the odd sheep-skin rug, but could see no sign guiding me to the breakfast room or indeed anywhere else. Consequently it was after several minutes of wandering around the ill-lit hallways and through several unpromising rooms that I located my host in a room where chairs were arranged in front of a fire on which some hares were toasting some rolls and buns. Tudor saw me enter the room and greeted me with a gloved paw while munching on a bread roll.

“Good morrow! Thou hast slept well, I trust?”

“Very well,” I answered, as indeed I had when I’d finally got used to the hardness of the mattress.

Tudor was accompanied by Hubert, who was sitting down with his columnar legs stretched out in front of him wedged into boots which just about accommodated them, and a Scottish Terrier about the same height as Tudor wearing black clothes

ornamented only by a grey lace collar. He had placed a tall black hat like a stove pipe on the arms of his chair and his paws were clasping a mug of tea. "Thou hast not met mine friend, the Philosopher," Tudor remarked. "He hath travelled many leagues from his distant land and ist once again honouring our fair nation with his presence."

"You're very kind, Tudor," the dog barked. "I always enjoy my visits to your pleasant land. And surely there is no pleasure greater than that found in travel and good company. A weary foot and a glad heart are the best comrades a soul can have."

"Are you also on a quest like Hubert?" I wondered.

"Goodness no, young man. No amount of travel could reach the object of my pursuit. Philosophical insights are gained only by contemplation and analysis. The deeper you search the more you uncover."

I nodded, pretending to understand what he was saying, and let my eyes wander about the breakfast room. In the corner were two hares in conversation and a young man in ragged clothes crouched on the floor wolfing down the relics of the meal we had been eating the evening before. He glanced up at me with a sheepish grin and then resumed his chewing on the cold meat on a bone. I scanned my companions in the hope that they might introduce me to this eccentric guest, but they were deep in conversation.

"...And the moral is that just as in any infinite series of numbers there is an incongruity, so too in any ethical practice there is an element of immorality..." The Philosopher noticed me while licking his tea-stained chops with his long flat tongue. "Are you troubled, young man? Perhaps you are not accustomed to ethical discourse. Be assured that the pursuit of knowledge is not achieved by conversation alone. A bird in the tree may in a flash of inspiration see what has eluded the greatest thinker."

“No, it’s not that,” I commented, slightly puzzled. “I was just wondering who that fellow is.” I pointed at the young man who was scooping at the insides of a soiled bowl with the crust of a stale roll.

The Philosopher suddenly burst into laughter, which was frighteningly like barking. Tudor tittered, but explained my *faux pas*. “An thou thinkst that wert a guest thou couldst ne’er be further from the truth. Nay, ’tis the Philosopher’s slave thou cravest know.”

“The Philosopher’s slave?”

“Slave. What could be simpler?” smiled the Philosopher. “Perhaps you don’t have such things where you come from?”

“No,” I admitted. “There are no slaves in the Suburbs.”

“’Tis verily true,” agreed Tudor. “’Tis rare in this land to encounter a slave. ’Tis forbid in many districts, and I woot the Suburbs ist a borough where ’tis so proscribed.”

“So what is seemly to the elephant is unseemly to the mastodon,” commented the Philosopher. “No, young man. In my country it is quite normal for those of means to purchase as good a slave or set of slaves as they can. This slave cost me a few crowns I can tell you. He is now my property and I am free to dispose of him exactly as I would any other property. This is a rôle equally sanctioned by my slave and he would no doubt not wish it otherwise.”

“Wouldn’t he prefer not to be a slave at all?” I wondered.

“That is a most naïve and simplistic view. Wouldn’t we all wish to have a different life than we have? The man on the other side of the hill is always on the better side. But we are always best off as we are. Each man is his most welcoming citadel.

My slave benefits from his working relationship with me because I provide him with security, safety, lodgings and food for as long as his work continues to be acceptable. His rôle in life is to serve, just as mine is to be served. The master needs the slave, just as the slave needs the master.”

“Why’s that, Philosopher?” wondered Hubert who was chewing some toast.

“Because without the one then the other has no existence at all. How can a master be a master if he has nothing to be master of? And for that matter how can a slave be a slave without a master to serve? It is all as it should be. The hare bounds in the field, while the sheep safely graze.”

“I may just be acting as the Devil’s Advocate here, Philosopher,” continued the giant teddy bear, “but have there not been many arguments postulated quite to the contrary. That rather than being natural, slavery is wholly unnatural and indeed unjust. This slave may look like just a ragged wretch, but given different chances in life might he not deserve a better lot? And wouldn’t it be better to be wretched and free, than well-fed and enslaved?”

“I don’t really understand why so many people in your country believe that liberty is *prima facie* a good thing. You wouldn’t want dragons or demons to wander free in this country. As free as the wind, but also as free as the raft adrift from its moorings. Nevertheless, I recognise the wisdom in such assertions, Hubert, and I would not advocate slavery if I didn’t accept its economic necessity. How could the economy of my nation, or of the world, prosper without the very valuable contribution made by slaves? How could we pursue philosophy and poetry, without the wealth creation of this invaluable underclass? Even the worm is needed to aerate the soil so that we can eat. For some to have plenty it is necessary for others to have less than

nothing at all.”

I wasn't at all persuaded by the Philosopher's arguments but I had no counter to them. I chose a line where I hoped I could get Hubert's support. "I didn't realise that Poetry needed slavery to exist. I thought Poetry was above the economic order."

"Poetry is the expression of Philosophy by elegant language," the Philosopher replied, not really addressing my objection. "And language is the means of all thought and expression. It is through a precise understanding of language and how it is used that we understand all subjects of discourse. But if a sheep wrote Poetry would we understand what it was saying?"

"Or even want to," commented Hubert. "Poetry isn't really Philosophy at all. It may express great insights, but not all these are of a philosophical nature. Some Cat poetry is noted by its absence of philosophical speculation and more by its unquestioning acceptance of what they consider to be the truth."

"Isn't that fatalistic acceptance itself a concern of Philosophy? Great thought is expressed through its absence as much as in its presence. But I am sorry to hear you speak even indirectly of any virtue in Feline practice or poetry. Their despicable behaviour in the war with my nation has shown Cats to be wholly unpossessing of the finer sensitivities, and they are certainly not eminent opponents of slavery. They are, after all, a species who have allowed themselves to be governed by an absolute hereditary ruler. It is true that I would no more advocate the rule of the anarchic mob any more than does the Cat. Good government by a tyrant is better than bad government by the people. I would say, however, that government is practised best by those selected and trained for their skills in the art than either the unschooled mob or those born to luxury. Indeed, luxury is as foreign to the skill of government as it is to

logical discourse. A greenhouse is not the best place to grow a turnip.”

“I dare say you are right, Philosopher,” smiled Hubert. He stood up from the chair and towered above his company. “But I must be on my way. I fear I have business elsewhere.”

“Where goest thou? Dost return to the Suburbs?”

“No. I doubt I shall ever return to the Suburbs. I go to the City. There are some archives I wish to examine.”

He then made his farewells and strode out of the breakfast room followed by a hare Tudor had detailed to see to his needs.

“Have ye both eaten well?” Tudor inquired as a servant closed the large oak door behind the teddy bear.

“Very well, thank you, Tudor. When the stomach is full, the heart is glad. As always your servants have prepared a sterling breakfast.”

“If ’tis so, then ’tis meet we promenade the gardens before ye leave on your travels. Where goest thou, Philosopher? Mayhap ’tis the same course as our Suburbanite friend.”

“The young man is quite welcome to accompany me if he so wishes. The tread is merry when the tongue does the walking. I shall be heading to the town of Iota, which I believe has been renamed recently, but I’m not sure to what. But a town by any other name must be the same.”

“‘Tis also said that a change of title ist a change in nature.”

“Exactly, Tudor,” agreed the Philosopher, putting on his tall black hat. “But lead on, dear sir; let us see your gardens. There is no beauty greater than that of a well-tended garden. A rose brings joy to the eye and relief to the weary thinker.”

Tudor led us through a series of doors and eventually out into the early morning sunlight. We were trailed by a retinue of hares and by the slave who kept his head bowed as he followed. The light was radiant compared to the relative gloom of Tudor's castle and I had difficulty in focusing my eyes on what was around, but I was impressed by the its orderliness. The rose bushes and herbaceous borders, the hedges and small statues, were all distinguished by well-defined orthogony. Tudor commented that the garden had been designed on the principle of the octagon, which he explained was a square with its corners halved. I soon lost track of his account, but it appeared to be of great interest to the Philosopher who had much to say about the number eight, which he remarked was very much like the symbol of infinity. "And who can tell what significance that may portend?"

"I trow but little," Tudor replied. "'Tis just a symbol. The power of the number lieth in its universality, not in its expression."

"Exactly so," agreed the Terrier, as if this was what he had just said. "If one were two and two were one, their sum would remain the same."

I reasoned this out, and it was indeed true. But I couldn't really understand what the Philosopher was trying to say. My attention returned to the garden where some sheep were grazing in the fields, tended by a hare with a crook, and near a herd of grazing fallow deer. Tudor's grounds stretched on with no apparent end, but this was partly because any enclosing wall was obscured by the small copses of oak and birch trees that scattered his estate.

My attention wandered back to the conversation between the Philosopher and Tudor as we strolled along the well-paved paths of the garden, with the servants just a few yards behind. They were discussing the coming General Election which enthralled

the Philosopher.

“Democracy has its merits, Tudor, but it appears to be a political system intrinsically marred by its very openness. Only a fool leaves his door open to all comers. Who can say with certainty who will come in?”

“’Tis so. The Election doth trouble me greatly. ’Tis possible that the Red Party couldst gain the greatest number of seats and ’twere so ’twill be great suffering in our land. I and many others would wish to forsake the land of our birth. And where wouldst a Mouse be welcome?”

“Democracy is only one system of government. It is often justified as a safeguard against the rule of a single person, as is the case in my country. And as it is in the Kingdom of the Cats. Autocracy is a system even more fraught as its good governance relies overmuch on the wisdom and goodness of that leader. If that ruler is truly virtuous, wise and far-seeing then that nation is truly a happy land. A firm hand at the tiller and the boat sails fair. But too often the monarch, despot or tyrant is flawed. By whatever means the power of the state is invested in a single ruler, by fair means or foul, by inheritance or *coup d’état*, there is so great a threat that he will be attentive not to the welfare of the people he represents but to that of himself and his family. Self-interest is not the greatest motive for altruism.

“Here in your country, there is a Democracy which pretends to represent the interests of the people and not of the rulers, but power is weakened as it serves so many disparate interests. How can a boat be steered if it is dragged both forward and back, sideways, and up and down? The boat will just sink, or, as in your country, remain still as the holes in its hulk are patched when they become too conspicuous. There is a clear failure of democracy as your six main political parties fight and

squabble over the direction of policy and resolve nothing. It is a boat adrift on a sea of troubles constantly threatening to overwhelm it, and in which many volumes of discussion have served not at all to calm the waves. This is why your Coition government has chosen to abandon its policy of compromise and consensus.”

“’Tis so, but I fear ’tis better far so as ’tis, than a government of communists, socialists or anarchists.” Tudor’s ears twitched in agitation as he surveyed his gardens. “Mine estate which I hath the great responsibility to tend wouldst be wrest from me. The labour of mine ancestors wouldst be for naught, and peasants wouldst wander unfettered through my gardens and castle rooms admiring not the legacy of a majestic tradition but its remnants. They would leave their sweet-wrappers and cigarette-ends on my garden paths. They would sneer at the portraits of my noble forbears. ’Tis a nightmare which I hope and I pray shalt ne’er be.”

“What you fear, Tudor, is not democracy, which has left you and your wealth intact, but the rule of the *mobus populus*. The anarchy of no government at all, but a state in which no one can say to another: you mustn’t do that! You fear that your servants will arise, forget your generosity and kindness, and snatch the wealth your family has accumulated over the centuries. Furthermore, the rule of the mob leads always and inevitably to the assertion of dictatorship. That which the anarchists most detest arises from the chaos, like a phoenix from the ashes.”

“’Twere best then that the nation be governed by a single ruler. ’Twould obviate the chaos in which mine inheritance wouldst be seized, the portraits slashed, the garden razed, the castle defaced and mine wealth scattered fruitlessly to the winds.”

It was clear that these images troubled Tudor considerably, as he paused,

surveying his estate, a claw grasping the handle of his sword and his servants trembling at the possibility that the violence of his feelings might be expressed more physically. He regarded us.

“The way to the town known formerly as Iota ist beyond mine estate and along the road. ’Tis less than eight furlongs distant. Dost wish to walk? Or dost wish to travel by carriage?”

“It’s a lovely morning, Tudor,” the Philosopher replied. “I would prefer to relish it on foot. Moreover the business I have in the woollen trade will occupy many hours of unpleasant haggling, and I fancy a brisk walk will set me well.”

With that the Philosopher and I sauntered off along the path Tudor indicated, with the Philosopher’s slave trailing us by several yards. Whilst the Philosopher strode along briskly and easily, pointing out with a staff the various flowers and fungi that lined our walk, his slave was burdened down under the weight of a heavy bag carried on his shoulders and another which was strapped to his chest. He didn’t appear to relish the morning sunshine nearly as much as his master. After a furlong or so we finally quit Tudor’s estate by a gate where a hare standing on guard with a musket was idly admiring the lambs frolicking amongst the daisies. He saluted us as we passed, but relaxed quite visibly when the slave staggered by behind.

The countryside was very green and pleasant. The fields were open, there were the occasional copses of trees and a stream babbled along the side of the path, sometimes near and sometimes winding away. The sun brightened the sky and cotton-wool clouds floated harmlessly by. Lambs and leverets were bounding about together in the fields, savouring the innocence of their tender years. The Philosopher revelled in the landscape which he described as an earthly paradise, a model of beauty and good

order, and a great source of obscure metaphor. He was very much in good spirits, unlike his servant struggling under the weight of the baggage. When I commented to the Philosopher on this, he merely commented that it was his slave's duty to serve and not his right to complain.

The Philosopher's good humour somewhat lessened when we were greeted by a modestly dressed Cat by a milestone that had lost all legibility with age. He was sitting down with a small bag on the end of a stick, a coat that came to below his waist, below which he wore green jerkins and buckled shoes. He wore a small hat on his head which fell between his ears and shaded his eyes from the sun.

"Good morning, sirs. Are you heading this way?"

The Philosopher was clearly discomfited to be addressed in such a familiar way, but he grasped his staff and replied in the affirmative with a voice struggling to retain its previous air of jollity.

"You don't mind if I join you?" the Cat asked, jumping up and walking alongside us before the Terrier could find a reason to decline. "It is so much better to stroll with convivial company, don't you think?"

"Good company finds its own stride," replied the Philosopher cryptically. "Where are you heading?"

"Oh nowhere in particular," the Cat replied. "I'm on holiday from the Kingdom and enjoy looking at everything. I've had quite a jolly time so far; and I've met some very interesting people. I thought I'd go to the next town and perhaps catch a coach or train to the City or somewhere else. I don't mind where I go as long as I am with friendly company."

"And do you meet much friendly company?" I wondered, reflecting on some of

the distinctly unfriendly comments Tudor had made regarding Cats.

“Oh, most people are very pleasant,” the Cat purred, “although there’s an awful lot of prejudice towards foreigners from some. Some of the sheep round here, for instance, have been awfully rude to me. They gathered around me bleating in a very abusive manner until I moved on. I really don’t understand it at all! Still, I just hope the people in the next town are friendlier.”

“Perhaps the reason the sheep abused you was that you’re a Cat,” commented the Philosopher.

The Cat seemed somewhat puzzled by this comment, and his stride became less confident, while his tail wagged in apparent disconsolation. Then he mewed good-humouredly. “Oh, you would say that, because you’re a Dog. No offence, but I’d absolutely forgotten. In this country there are so many different types of people that you just completely disregard things like that. I mean, look at all the sheep and hares round here. In the Kingdom there are mostly only Cats. And a few Mice and Dogs, but you hardly ever get to meet many of them. I suppose a lot of you Dogs aren’t particularly keen on Cats. Not that I can blame you. The King and his ministers have some pretty bizarre views on Dogs and Mice, haven’t they? You’d have thought they’d learnt something from the way history has treated the Feline species, wouldn’t you?”

“Indeed,” remarked the Philosopher without humour. “History is a lesson in the school of life the Cats have definitely not attended. And without knowledge of History, the Cat is like a tree detached from its roots.”

The Cat laughed indulgently. “I say! That’s jolly good! Where do you get all these sayings from? You don’t make them up do you?”

The Philosopher didn’t reply nearly as amiably. “I am a Philosopher. It is my

duty to observe, comment, cogitate and deliberate, and then to disseminate the wisdom I have gained by my efforts.”

“Well, the very best to you! As I say, I don’t blame you Dogs for feeling so sore, but I hope you don’t think that all Cats feel the same way as the King about things. I mean, quite a lot of Cats, and I’m one of them, really think the Mice get a really raw deal. It’s not their fault they happened to have settled on our ancestral lands. And the same goes for the Dogs in the occupied territories. It must be bad enough to lose a war: it must add insult to injury to then be treated as second class citizens in their own country. Mind you! It’s not as if your Dog Republics treat even Dogs very much better than the Kingdom does.”

“What do you mean?” growled the Philosopher.

If the Cat suspected that his companion was less than delighted by his company he didn’t show it. “Well, look at the appalling way the Greyhounds were treated in the tiny Spaniel Republic. Not to mention how the Irish Terriers are being persecuted by the Dalmatians. And if you were a Daschund, are you really better treated in the Canine Republics than you would be as a subject of the Kingdom?”

“The Dog Republics are at least governed for Dogs by Dogs; not by foreigners trawled in from all over the globe and planted on soil cultivated for centuries by other species. They don’t practise a heathen religion that attributes a Divine Right to Rule on a Cat by mere good fortune of his parentage. They haven’t plundered their neighbours nor been the author of the atrocities that Cats have visited upon us. And the Canine Republics don’t administer foreign countries as if they were their own nor disregard the sovereignty of their neighbours when searching for so-called terrorists.”

“Oh dear! You really don’t like Cats at all do you!”

“I’m not prejudiced,” snarled the dog viciously. “I would never declare that one species of animal is necessarily superior to another. We all share the same basic design. But the practice of the Kingdom of Cats demonstrates to me that the Cat is as yet unready to govern, as has the Cat been wholly unworthy throughout History. The Kingdom of Cats is nothing more than a bastard state, a political abomination and a threat to regional stability.”

“I see,” mused the Cat thoughtfully. He looked around nervously, and then spotted the slave stooped down under his load behind us, sweat dripping from his forehead and leaving drops along the dusty path behind him. “And what about your friend? Don’t you think he might do with some help with that awfully heavy luggage he’s carrying? I could help him, don’t you think?”

“I think not!” snarled the Philosopher. “He is my slave and I don’t wish to have my property violated by feigned Feline kindness.”

“Oh! Is that what you think?” the Cat commented rather unhappily, his tail wagging agitatedly and his whiskers sagging. He looked around him. “Well! Goodness me! An inn!” he announced pointing at one down a small lane to the left. “What I fancy is a nice glass of milk! Would you care to join me?”

“No, I would not!” barked the Scottish Terrier, turning his head away. He strode faster and I had to increase my stride to keep up with him, while his slave almost had to break into a trot. The Cat, meanwhile, stood alone at the corner of the lane clearly rather unsettled by the Philosopher’s sentiments. My companion remained uncharacteristically silent for a furlong or so more, not slackening his pace and his paws gripping his staff so determinedly that his claws left distinct marks on it.

“Well, young man,” ventured the Philosopher at last, “what brings you so far

from your borough of the Suburbs? Is it merely a desire to travel?"

"Well, not just that." I told him about my quest for the Truth.

"The Truth!" exclaimed the Philosopher. "That's exactly what my quest in life has been, but not by travelling. I would be very surprised to find the Truth in such an aimless way. The Truth can only be discovered by intense ceaseless philosophical enquiry. With enough time and effort even a worm can find its way to the end of a maze. With a powerful enough microscope even a mole can see the atoms of fundamental creation. With sufficient philosophical enquiry the Truth will surely be revealed."

"Do you have a hypothesis of what the Truth may be?"

"The pursuit of such metaphysical enquiry has not been my speciality, but I have read widely and debated long with many of the finest minds of our time. My opinion is that the Truth is such that when it has been demonstrated as found, by rigorous logic, then the end of all philosophical enquiry will have been achieved. The Truth will shine out from the predicate calculus of its expression. Indeed it could be said that some of the Truth is already known."

"Is that so?" I asked, speculating that I might be nearer the object of my search than I'd anticipated.

"Indeed it is! It is undeniable, for instance, when I say that if all birds fly, then if that is a bird then it must fly. This is true by virtue of its expression and is what the Truth must partake of."

"But not all birds *do* fly," I objected. "Penguins don't fly. Kiwis don't fly. Ostriches, diatrymas and rheas don't fly. And if a bird damages its wing or if the wing is clipped then it can't fly."

The Philosopher smiled. "You are clearly not a logician. It matters not whether a proposition is true. The Truth lies in the expression of that proposition. It follows that if the reasoning is correct, then if the propositions express the Truth then the Truth is revealed: however amazing and unbelievable that Truth may be."

"Then the Truth must lie in the fundamental propositions," I commented.

"Exactly so. A house made of straw will surely fall, but one built on firm foundations will weather any storm."

"Isn't the question then to find what these firm foundations are, rather than in what they can be used to build?" I speculated, using the Philosopher's metaphor.

"Philosophers have said that what we see in the world are just shadows of the Truth. Our lives and our experiences are nothing more than the most modest reflection of the Truth. And it has been said that it is impossible to directly gaze at it, as we would be blinded like one staring at the sun. We are just silhouettes of our real polydimensional selves. Scientists have concluded that at the smallest quantum level of the universe the rules governing the universe are totally unlike those we perceive. We see just the crudest outline of what the Truth may be."

"So the Truth is something that can't be directly experienced?"

"I didn't say that. But there are those who would say so. And there are those who say that the Truth is not a physical thing that could be experienced at all. It is just a proper reasoned expression of what the universe may be, arrived at only from the most fundamental of axioms. *Cogito ergo sum*. By being sure of what we know by rigorous logical enquiry then we can be certain that what we know is truly what we know. We can be certain that the universe is so and not such."

"The Truth doesn't appear to be a particularly exciting thing in that case," I

commented with disappointment.

“Indeed why should it be? Others profess that the Truth is nothing more nor less than God. They argue that the proper pursuit of the Truth is merely to know God, in all His glory and magnificence. Some have sought to prove the existence of God from the workings of the universe; asserting that the Truth is nothing more than another name for the Great Mover, the Original Being and the Creator of all things. I have my doubts, because it would not answer the question as to *why* there is a God. The deeper you plunge, the deeper still there is to descend.” The Scottish Terrier looked at my puzzled expression. “I hope I have illuminated your ignorance,” he remarked. “Philosophical enquiry is like a torch shone in the darkness, but like a torch it is painful to look directly into its beam.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” I mused. “Perhaps I’m searching for the Truth in totally the wrong way. Maybe I should spend my time in thought and meditation.”

“Thought should be adequate, young man. But I see that we have arrived at the town. Where’s my slave?” He looked around him irritably, and could see the slave quite a long distance behind us bowed further down by the weight of the luggage and walking towards us rather slower than we’d managed. “Pah! The lazy peasant. I’ll be late for my appointment if he doesn’t hurry!”

He barked urgently at the slave who stood visibly more upright and hastened a little faster.

I left the Philosopher waiting impatiently for his slave by the roadside, angrily muttering to himself, and proceeded towards the town which I only knew by its former name of Iota.

9

I was impressed by the many banners and flags hung up along the road approaching the town. **The Borough of Rupert Welcomes the Great Leader. We Salute You, Chairman President. All Hail President Chairman Rupert.** I had the distinct impression that the people of the town were very enthusiastic about President Chairman Rupert: a notion reinforced by portraits of the koala in many striking and heroic poses hanging from lamp-posts, embellishing walls and filling enormous posters. These were intermingled with election posters all for the Illicit Party. There were none at all representing other Parties. Everywhere there was Rupert's face wearing his broad-brimmed hat, accompanied by a single word next to a cross in a square. The single word was sometimes self-explanatory like **Rupert, Illicit** and **Unity**. Sometimes the word suggested something less obvious like **100%, Republicity** and **Truth**. This last word particularly caught my attention, especially as it was one used more frequently than almost all others. Even some of the slogans used the word. **Only the Illicit Party knows the Truth. Truth is Illicit and Rupert. The Truth belongs to the Illicit Cause.**

The enthusiasm expressed for the Illicit Party and its leader built up steadily as I wandered past a brand new sign that read in enormous letters: **Welcome to the Illicit Borough of Rupert**, under which were details relating to the town being twinned to the cities of Rupertgrad and Rupertsville in the Illicit Republic of Rupert. This enthusiasm wasn't constrained to banners and posters, as I found myself in a town almost full to overflowing with people all moving in one direction. Most townspeople

were sheep of one kind or another, and I was nearly deafened by their excited bleating punctuated with the chanting of political slogans. I couldn't easily differentiate the slogans but many included the words *Illicit* and *Rupert*. One sounded like: "Her Maphrodite Good. Rupert Better." Another referred unfavourably to Cats, but over the competing noises I could catch only the gist of a litany of crimes attributed to them and the tortures that Cats deserved as a result.

I followed the crowd's flow, curious to discover what was attracting so many people. It was very orderly and this was ensured by the presence of small dragons standing on street corners emanating a steady stream of smoke from their nostrils, nursing semi-automatic firearms between their wings and their forearms, while their serpentine tails wagged from side to side. The density of images relating to Rupert steadily increased, as not only did his marsupial features gaze benignly down from enormous hoardings on the top of buildings and from the walls of every available building, but, as if more were needed, many sheep carried banners adorned by the koala. These banners also had slogans relating to issues hinted elsewhere, such as: **100% Turnout. 100% Rupert. Avenge the Sufferings of Feline Expansion and Truth and Justice and an Illicit Government.** The images of Rupert included even a statue, at least nine feet high, standing on a tall pedestal well above the crowd. The statue gazed towards the distant horizon, one paw hidden in the depths of a monstrous great coat and the other held out horizontally in front as if showing the way.

The purpose of this large gathering, I discovered from reading some posters, was that there was a political rally to inspire electoral support for the Illicit Party. This had already started, and as I approached more closely to the town square loudspeakers

blared the voice of a small dragon in a very dapper suit who was addressing the crowd of ruminant supporters and raising the occasional approving cheer. However, this speaker, popular though he clearly was, did not fully explain the large turnout. The reason was that President Chairman Rupert himself was due to address the gathering. He was actually meant to be speaking now, but even from the hundred yards or so that I stood from the platform that had been erected for the speakers, I could see that he was not even amongst those seated in chairs behind the dragon.

Driven by curiosity, I moved into the midst of a crowd fortunately mostly somewhat shorter than me, so I could get a very good view and was soon able to position myself where I could properly hear what was being said. An enormous bank of speakers curved round in a semicircle to address the heaving mass of woolly fleeced supporters who crowded out the entire square, and spread beyond and behind the surrounding buildings. The odd dragon strode through the crowd carrying an automatic weapon and puffing menacingly to calm the more over-enthusiastic lambs. The speaker was clearly getting very excited by his own rhetoric in which he interspersed the words *Truth*, *Cat Menace*, *Illicit Party* and, most frequently of all, the name of *Rupert*, for whom no praise seemed adequate.

The dragon brought his address to a close by repeating over and over again the word **Rupert**, which was echoed increasingly by the audience. This became a loud monotonous chant of “Rupert! Rupert! Rupert!” Then, when I was sure the chant couldn’t get louder, the crowd let loose a thunderous incoherent cry as a small figure appeared from the corner of the stage, sporting a great coat which reached almost down to his ankles and a flamboyant hat, and sauntered towards the centre of the stage. On cue, enormous screens above and on either side of the stage suddenly

flickered into life to display identical pictures of the same koala waving his arms at the audience in appreciation of the greeting he earned.

This went on for nearly ten minutes in which I felt trapped in the mass of people and threatened by a cheering that sent vibrations up from the cobbled ancient ground through my legs, causing my jaw to tremble and my ears to ache. And then, suddenly, with a single lowering of the President Chairman's upraised arms, the crowd was hushed. There was not even a single bleat. An enormous image of his face filled the screen. A colossal flag of green, red and black descended to the back of the stage in the centre of which was a single vertical black line that I presumed was the letter **I** representing the Illicit Party.

"We have worked hard. We have laboured long. We have struggled against all adversity. We have defeated our enemies. The enemies of Illiberal Socialism and the Truth. Through astute and farseeing manoeuvres, we have seen off traitors and secured power for the great cause of Illiberal Socialism in our land. And now we shall secure the same cause here." The crowd roared its approval. "Here in the Illiberal Socialist Borough. Here with all of you gathered here. Here. And Now. Illiberal Socialism begins its relentless, unstoppable struggle which in the Election or after will bring us to Power in this land. Here and Now is where the Battle commences!"

The koala paused and the crowd took its cue for a wild abandon of applause, much the same as before but focused now on the rallying cry: "Lead us forward, Rupert! Take the nation! Exterminate Her Maphrodite and the Coition ministers!"

"The continuing success of the Illiberal Socialist cause is the accomplishment of a political movement which addresses the needs of all the people, which powers the engine of great economic growth and brings prosperity to all. The Illicit Party is the

Party of Freedom.”

“Freedom!” roared the crowd.

“True Freedom is freedom from want, from poverty, from despair, from indecision, from uncertainty and from the corruptions of the capitalist, imperialist reactionary. Freedom to serve the greatest causes. Freedom to follow and obey. Freedom to build the strength of the Illicit State. With a strength, untainted by bourgeois liberal caveats, to crown the achievements of the Illiberal Socialist Republics with victory here, led by you, the people of the Illiberal Socialist Borough. Pooling together your untutored strength and your determination to wage war for Peace and Prosperity. For it is only by unceasing struggle using sticks, stones, firearms and missiles that true Peace will be attained. And then we will be Free. Free from the corrupt Coition government and its communist, capitalist and imperialist ministers. Freedom!”

“Freedom! Freedom!” came the chant.

“And what does this Freedom the Illiberal Socialist movement desire so much? Is it the freedom from oppression and dictatorship so desired by the petty bourgeoisie? The liberty that promises so much, but furnishes us instead with vile pornography, immoral literature, repugnant art and so much opinion that no one knows when they are right or when they are wrong. The freedom that borders on chaos and anarchy in which crime is rife and the mob wanders where it pleases. What freedom is that? No freedom at all! And is it the freedom advocated by the Red Party? The freedom to organise, rebel, destroy and usurp. No! The freedom advocated by Illiberal Socialism is the freedom to serve, the freedom to struggle in a great cause. The freedom which serves the greater good. And that is what we mean when we advocate Freedom. We

want freedom now! Freedom from the Reds, the Blues and the Greens!”

“Freedom! Freedom!” The crowd chanted, stomped and enthused in a regular rhythm partly coordinated by the dragon stewards mingling with the crowd and raising smoke from their mouths as they yelled out a refrain that gradually returned to a refrain of “Rupert! Rupert!”

The koala raised a paw to silence the crowd, which did so with remarkable promptness. “There are those who criticise the Illiberal Socialist Party for contesting the General Election. They say that as we do not practice democracy in the Illiberal Socialist Republics then we are hypocrites to participate in the process here. But democracy is nothing more than the means by which the people of a country choose how they wish to be governed. And in the Illiberal Socialist Republics that decision has been made. Unequivocally. Unanimously. And Eternally. As it will be made here tomorrow!”

The crowd roared its approval and perhaps prematurely a section of the audience recommenced a chant of “Rupert! Rupert!” He let it carry on for nearly a minute before silencing it with a gesture and continuing.

“When the people of this nation so wish, and by the flawed process of Representational Democracy if necessary, the Illicit Party will take power in this land. Then this country will enjoy the more genuine democracy as it is practised in the Illiberal Socialist Republics. Not a paper democracy where once every four years or so, the people are allowed the rare privilege to register their disapproval of the governing parties. Not a democracy where the people’s sole method of making themselves heard is by entering a cross against the appropriate candidate. The democracy the Illicit Party believes in is not one where each candidate is presented to the people only for the

campaign for election and then squanders the rest of his tenure in the City far away from those he supposedly represents.

“No! The democracy practised in the Illiberal Socialist Republics is an active one. One where a Party official is at hand in even the smallest community ready to listen to the representations of the people and report his findings to a pyramid of party officials able to respond swiftly to each specific issue. Within weeks or even days of the representation there is prompt and decisive action. The faulty shearing machines are repaired, the broken cobbles are mended and the new by-pass built. The corrupt landlord, bureaucrat or intellectual is appropriately punished. The statues and posters reminding each of us of our duties to the Illiberal Socialist cause are erected in response to popular demand. The shopkeeper, café-owner and hairdresser insufficiently reflecting the Illiberal Socialist zeal of his customers is chastised. And in addition, the local Party official also guides the community in the ways of Illiberal Socialist doctrine, weeds out the shirkers and malcontents, and ensures that everyone is happy with their lot. In the Illiberal Socialist Republics discontent is gravely frowned upon and the future for a Party official in a discontented community is unlikely to be prosperous.

“So, to all the doubters and cynics: We are not afraid to hear the voice of the people. Go! I beseech you! Go ahead tomorrow and register your vote for the Illicit Party and your excellent local candidate!”

The crowd immediately erupted into more cheering and chanting. I felt increasingly crushed by the pressure from behind as more and more people moved forward to be nearer the President Chairman. I was grateful indeed that the crowd were fleeced so well. However, no matter how crowded it was, there seemed to be no

obstacle to the flow of stewards through the throng.

“It has been said that the Illicit Party has no policy on wealth and power. It is proclaimed by these sceptics that political debate should only address the two issues of wealth distribution and the concentration of power. All other issues are mere distractions from a great class struggle that has been taking place since the earliest of times. What nonsense I say! What poppycock! Have you heard anything so ridiculous?”

The crowd was invited to laugh which it duly did, but I still wasn't sure what the joke was.

“It is this spurious debate which divides the two wings of political opinion: the Reds and Greens on the one side and the Blues and Blacks on the other. The Red Party and other communists throughout the world claim to represent the interests of the poor which they would achieve by a dictatorship of the proletariat, in which all wealth and power is distributed amongst the poor. What utter nonsense! Is society to be turned upside down? Is the servant to tell his master what to do? Is the student to teach his lecturer? Is the shop floor worker to dictate to his manager what should be produced? What arrant and dangerous nonsense!”

The crowd laughed appreciatively. These were more like jokes.

“The Blue and Black Parties represent opinions of the right, by which they assert that the preservation of law and order is dependant on the current distribution of wealth and power. They claim that by acting in the interests of the rich and powerful they act as guardians of law, order and common decency. But if the law be corrupt? If the order be fractured? If the rich and powerful act against the interests of the people? Where then is the argument for preserving the wealth and power of the established

order? We say that the interests of the people are best served by seizing it from the present corrupt, immoral and uncaring establishment. Then to transfer it to safe custody in the interests of all the people and in the furtherance of the Illicit cause.

“We say to you corrupt businessmen, condescending aristocracy and overpaid intellectuals: Enjoy your wealth and privilege now for as long as you can. For soon it will belong to us!”

The crowd erupted again in great cheers. “Rupert! Rupert! Rupert!” A few dragon stewards raised their small-arms above their heads and waved them in exultation. Firecrackers exploded noisily in the distance.

While the crowd continued to show its approval by cheering, chanting, banging drums, whistling and waving banners, I scanned over their heads. Amongst the sheep and dragons were humans, mermen, lions, crabs, scorpions and there in the distance a solitary Cat whom I felt sure was the traveller I’d recently met on the way to the town. He was rapt in attention and showed no evidence of having seen me.

“Government is always fraught by uncertainty and indecision,” continued the koala, his face beaming out from the screens to the whole crowd. “Even an Illiberal Socialist government is run by imperfect beings, of which I must count myself. Bad decisions are made which seem so right at the time, but later appear so wrong. The Illicit Party has made such mistakes, it must be acknowledged. Once we were too tolerant of criticism from intellectuals and academics: a mistake now rectified. Once we allowed too much power and wealth to remain in the hands of the aristocrats, capitalists and counter-revolutionaries. Although corrected now, the Illiberal Socialist Republics still suffer from the legacy of this indulgence and lack of unswerving zeal. There is only one way that a government can be sure that what it does is right, proper

and for the best. There is only one way to ensure that government is truly for the best, without regard for the petty bourgeois tendencies of its administrators. And that way can only be achieved by possession of the Truth!”

“Rupert! Rupert!” chanted the crowd in agreement, while I reeled at the import of the President Chairman’s remarks. Was the Illicit Party, like myself, on a quest for the Truth? What did the koala mean by the Truth? Was it the same thing that I was looking for?

“This is why I have authorised a search for the Truth!” Rupert announced as if echoing my thoughts. “With the Truth, there will no longer be doubt or indecision. With the Truth, it will be known for sure where mistakes may be made and how they can be avoided. Armed with the Truth, an Illicit government can ensure that government is fair, just and accords with the aims of Illiberal Socialism. It is the right, indeed the prerogative, of the Illicit Party to be armed with this, the most potent of all weapons, against which we need have no fear of contradiction, no fear of wavering from the best path towards the proper exercise of power. So I tell you now. Go out! In your thousands! In your greatest numbers! And seek the Truth! Seek it here! Seek it there! With the massed effort of all Illicitists, the Truth will be found and will forever serve the interests of our great movement! The Truth! The Truth!”

The crowd echoed this cry and all around me I was surrounded by the chant: “The Truth! The Truth!” intermingled with “Rupert! Rupert!” and even the combination “Rupert is the Truth! Rupert is the Truth!” The koala allowed this last chant to dominate, orchestrated by some dragons whose cries came out in bursts of sulphurous fumes.

He raised his paws.

“No! No! I am not the Truth! The Truth is not I! No person however good and wise can embody the Truth. It is a thing beyond mere corporeal being. Beyond even the knowledge and wisdom represented by the Illiberal Socialist movement. The Truth is the embodiment, the expression and the undeniability of all that can be. It contains the essence of morality, government, wisdom, knowledge and power. It is all that has ever been desired. All that could *ever* be desired. The Truth is all that there is. Omnipresent, immanent and elusive. It is there. It must be there. Under all the superficialities of life, seen through the distorted lens of all the senses, there it lies waiting to be demonstrated, experienced and learnt from. And the Truth is what we shall all seek!

“The Illicit Party is the only cause to admit that its objective is to attain the Truth. The other parties heretically claim to already be in possession of it. A Truth mysteriously found in the works of Mohammed, Marx, St. Paul, Hitler, Adam Smith, Confucius or the Buddha. The Red Party says that it lies in the redistribution of wealth and power. The Black Party in the certainties of dogma and prejudice. The Blue Party in the continuation of tradition and the practice of capitalism. The Green Party in the maintenance of the ecosystem. The White Party in who knows what.

“Only the Illicit Party is humble enough to admit that it does not have sole possession of the Truth. Only the Illicit Party is willing to strive for the Truth, not trammelled by an ideology which claims prior knowledge. And on this greatest quest of all, all of us, of whatever species, race, epoch or mythology, are together called upon to seek it out. To look for the Truth. Wherever it may be. In the Country. In the City. In the Suburbs. Wherever! So when you leave today, let your thoughts be only on the Truth. After you have voted for the rightful succession of power by the Illicit

Party's candidates, your minds should be focused on only one thing. And that thing is the Truth! The Truth!"

"The Truth! The Truth!" obediently chanted the crowd.

I stood in a degree of confusion. Had my quest been superseded? With so many people searching for the Truth, what chance was there in my quest being successful? And where would the search take all these thousands of Illicit Party supporters?

"It has been said that possession of the Truth would make no difference to the conduct of government. Politics, Power and the State are entities wholly divorced from the theoretical constructs embodied by the Truth. Even with the Truth, it is said, there would be no change to the conduct of government. There is already sufficient wealth in the world it is said for everyone to be moderately well off and yet there is starvation. It is universally agreed that murder and crime are wrong and yet they are still prevalent. How should possession of the Truth make any difference? But there is a difference in kind. The Truth is absolute. It is eternal. It is incapable of being refuted.

"In the custody of the Illicit Party, which, under my chairmanship, is committed to following the edicts of the Truth however unpalatable they may be, possession of the Truth will make all the difference. All the difference there can be! You have my word! So! All of you! From the smallest lamb to the largest wyvern, it is now that you must take the initiative. Follow the Illicit Party banner. And all in your vast numbers to seek out the Truth. To find it. Secure it. And then bring it back to me. And to the Illicit Party! Find the Truth!"

"The Truth! The Truth! The Truth!" echoed the crowd.

I gazed at the small distant figure of the koala as he gestured wildly at the crowd whose cheers crashed like waves in crescendos of volume and whose face on

the screen expressed satisfaction through beady eyes shadowed slightly by his large hat. For several minutes the cheering continued, waxing and waning, now thundering, now almost a murmur. And then just as I was thinking that the speech was drawing to an end, he drew his arm out in a horizontal sweeping gesture which quite suddenly cut off the cheering and chanting like someone turning off the volume switch of a radio.

“There have been many slanders expressed about the Illicit Party by our enemies and recidivists. From what I hear it would seem that it is the author of great injustices and crimes. And that I, as Chairman of the Party, am myself a vile criminal. Such slanders cannot remain unchallenged. It is not true that government in the Socialist Republics is maintained by terror and fear. It is not true that anyone other than the convicted criminal is ever arrested without trial. And it is not true, as some have said, that the Illicit Party is a racist or speciesist party. It is wholly contradictory to the policies and practises of Illiberal Socialism that any individual should be discriminated against on account of the number of legs they may have, the furriness or scaliness of their skin or their height. Such discrimination is wholly against the fundamental precepts of Illicitism. Ungulate or pachyderm. Saurischian or ornithischian. Cretaceous or Pliocene. Chimæra or dragon. All are the same in the regard of the Illicit Party.

“However, the sternest critics of the Illicit Party are those who themselves discriminate against all species other than their own, and have done so since their inception in the shadow of the earliest pyramids. These are, of course, the Cats, who, under the leadership of their King so cruelly discriminate against Mice, Dogs and Sheep.”

The crowd gasped. “Death to the Cats!” chanted one section of it. “Death to

the Cat Kingdom!” chanted another section. I glanced over at the Cat traveller who appeared untroubled by these remarks.

“One reason why the Feline critics have libelled the Illicit cause is because we alone of all the parties have a constructive policy towards natural selection. The Illicit Party recognises that with time, the people of a nation become genetically inferior unless an effort is made to encourage the breeding of superior stock, and, at the same time, to discourage the breeding of the genetically inferior. In this way, the people of Illicit nations will be only the most intelligent, most physically fit and most loyal.

“Already the people of the Illiberal Socialist Republics are obliged to petition for the right to bear children and are awarded quotas of production according to their fitness to do so. For those who are especially well-qualified, these quotas are generous and it is made plain that it is viewed as the individual’s duty to achieve these reproduction quotas. For the least fit, the Illicit Party offers (free of charge!) methods to ensure these individuals are relieved of the ability to reproduce should they be so tempted. The demand for these services has been quite high, and consequently the treatment has been rather brusque and irreversible. It is also believed that for those who are not obviously fit or unfit, which includes many Illicit Party officials, it is necessary to demonstrate fitness to reproduce measured by devotion and loyalty to the Illicit cause. In this way, Illicitism will be maintained forever on the deoxyribonucleic acid of the people.”

The crowd seemed less inspired by this discourse, and the President Chairman may have noticed that the resulting cheers and chants were less than overwhelming. He didn’t dwell on this subject, and instead raised his voice to bring the crowd to attention.

“It is the view of the Illicit Party that there is such a thing as inferior stock, which results from millennia of inbreeding and unselective breeding. A prime example of this is the Cat. The Cat is a degenerate species that has lost many of the proud attributes of its ancestors. This is reflected by the primitive nature of government that the Cat has adopted. Whereas all other species have aspired to modern government led by presidents or democratically elected individuals, only the Cat has opted for a form of government in which power is invested in a single individual whose qualifications to govern are merely to do with the ‘nobility’ of his birth. The Illicit Party is utterly opposed to such hereditary dictatorships and is therefore opposed to the very essence of the Cat Kingdom.

“The Cat is also an inherently war-like species. Whilst others have forsworn their carnivorous tendencies, the Cat has reversed the process in its fierce wars against the Dogs bordering the Cat Kingdom’s frontiers and the Mice who live within. The Cat will never be satisfied until he has all other mammals under his merciless yoke, no doubt feeling free to feast on them. How can the civilised world permit the Cat to fix his teeth and claws in the flesh of his enemies?

“Not only is the Cat exemplary of all that is wrong, as the result of centuries of inbreeding, but in all lands the Cat has cunningly and deceitfully amassed wealth which by rights belongs to other species. The Cat has become the archetypal capitalist and speculator, by his manipulation of the hard-saved earnings of those foolish enough to invest in their concerns or to buy at their shops or to wear the clothes they have made. How much of the wealth that should by rights belong to us all is held by the foul feline! The cunning cat! The manipulative moggie!”

The crowd was more excited by Rupert’s condemnation of Cats. I regarded the

Cat traveller who seemed visibly nervous even from this distance: his tail wagging involuntarily and his whiskers twitching. He was presumably hoping that by keeping a low profile he'd be able to sneak away from the large crowd who were looking at him with hostile interest.

“Not only does the Cat take your money! He takes the jobs that should go to sheep and others. How often have you applied for a job only to find that a contentedly purring Cat has taken it from you? How often have you applied for a bank loan only for a Cat in an office miles away to turn you down? How often has your life been ruined by the devious, inscrutable Feline malefactor? How long can decent people stand by while Cats take, take and take from others? How long can we continue to suffer the Feline yoke? How much more can we take?”

“Death to Cats! Down with Cats!” chanted the crowd in unison.

Then quite suddenly, the Cat traveller, who'd somehow remained standing in amongst the hostile crowd was knocked over onto the back of a ewe. He picked himself up only to be knocked over again. The area around him erupted into a whirlwind of aggression as people of all species descended on the Cat who could be glimpsed in the scrum. His clothes were torn off and the rags remaining were thrown up into the air. The President Chairman paused in his address and impassively viewed the proceedings, but notably made no attempt to calm things down.

The last I saw of the Cat was of a battered naked figure with a torn ear, blood running from where his eye might have been and a crooked waving tail, fur pulled out in chunks revealing his bare flesh and mewling piteously. Then before I could really make out more details, the battered figure was once again submerged under a mass of hooves and claws with flaying limbs and blood. In the scramble for the unfortunate Cat

I could hear the bleating of lambs pressed by the mass of their neighbours and saw a dragon steward rescue a pelican who'd been trampled by the mob and whose white feathers were a mess of blood and whose wings were painfully broken. While this was happening, the orchestrated chants and cheers continued unabated, accompanied by a frightening more primæval roar of aggression.

“Death to Cats! Kill all Cats! Down with the Cat Kingdom!” shouted the crowd. Gradually, the chant became more positively: “Rupert! Rupert! Rupert!” and the references to Cats appeared to be forgotten as easily as the passion of hatred had begun.

President Chairman Rupert commenced his speech after calming the passions of the crowd with another gesture, but I had lost my appetite for the rally. I couldn't help wondering whether the wrath of the crowd might soon be directed away from Cats and towards people from the Suburbs. So, while he continued his speech, I struggled out through the crush of the crowd to the quieter streets beyond the public square. It was not easy threading through the tightly pressed bodies and it was with considerable relief that I found myself at last in the relatively deserted streets beyond. It seemed as if everybody in the town was at the rally.

There was a small café open several streets away, so feeling hungry as it was now past midday I entered and ordered myself a hamburger and chips from the counter where I sat. In very little time my order arrived in a small plastic container and I paid the shilling and sixpence that the meal cost. The café was not unlike similar fast food places in the suburbs, but the walls were pasted with Illicit Party posters, and a massive portrait of President Chairman Rupert dominated above the plastic laminated pictures of muttonburgers, beefburgers and french fries. The person serving was a small young

dragon wearing the green costume of his job with a paper hat carrying the symbol of **Mutton King**, the title of the store. His name was written on a plastic badge on his lapel amongst a plethora of badges bearing Rupert's face.

"Have you been to the rally?" he asked me.

I nodded as I bit into the hamburger and removed a strand of onion from my teeth.

"I wish I could have gone, but **Mutton King** just wouldn't understand. I'd love to see the Great Leader myself. He's been speaking, hasn't he? What did he have to say?"

I reflected on what I could remember while chewing on the meat. "He had a lot to say about the Truth."

"The Truth!" mused the dragon thoughtfully. "So the great quest is on! I heard it would be! And so close to the General Election as well! The Great Leader is so wise! I hope to join the search for the Truth myself." He scratched his chin with a claw while a small cloud of smoke billowed from his nostrils. "Are you going to be searching for the Truth, too?"

"Yes, I am," I admitted positively. "I've been searching for the Truth now for several days."

"You're certainly ahead of me! You're sure to find it before anyone else! You must be a very true supporter of the Illicit Party."

"Not really," I admitted. "I decided on my quest for the Truth before I knew that the Illicit Party was also doing so."

"Really!" said the dragon, clearly quite impressed. "How wonderful! But of course it will be the Illicit Party who will find the Truth. As is only right. It is the

prerogative of the Illicit Party to find it before anyone else can. Only the Illicit Party is able to fully utilise the Truth for the greater good of everyone. How did you decide on this quest before the Great Leader showed us all the way?”

“I’m not sure. It just seemed like a good idea.”

“And of course it’s a good idea. It must be! Otherwise, the Great Leader would never instruct us all to follow it. Do you have any idea where the Truth might be?”

“I don’t know. I left the Suburbs with just that question.”

“The Suburbs! I’ve heard rumoured that the Truth may be there. But you obviously don’t believe it is?”

“In the Suburbs? That would be the very last place I’d expect to find it. I’m sure it’s elsewhere. Perhaps in the City. Perhaps in a distant country. I really don’t know.”

“And have you any idea what the Truth might be?”

“None at all. People have told me all sorts of things about what they think it might be, but I’ve yet to come across anyone who can convince me. Whatever it is, I’m sure I’ll know it when I find it.”

“That’s what I hope, too! I’m sure that if I’m the one that’s lucky enough to find it, I’ll recognise it. And when I do, I’ll so gladly come galumphing back to the Great Leader carrying it like booty and presenting it to him so humbly. ‘Here it is!’ I’ll say. ‘It’s yours to do with whatever you like!’ Wouldn’t that be wonderful! Perhaps he’d make me a Party Official. Maybe a member of the Inner Party. And then I would be able to stand in his presence all day long. What do you think?”

I finished my beefburger and left a few of the more soggy french fries lying in a puddle of brown sauce. I re-entered the street outside where I could distinctly hear the

thunderous sound of Rupert's address reverberating from opposing houses. The streets were eerily empty in comparison to the crush in the square, and all the other shops were shut. I peered inside them, and noted that all of them had several portraits of the President Chairman on the walls. I didn't have to search hard to see his face, as it was also gazing down on me from the many posters and billboards surrounding me.

I decided that I was unlikely to find the Truth in the borough of Rupert, so I wandered out from the town the way I'd come in search of a bus stop to take me elsewhere. I had no real idea where I wanted to go, but I felt sure that the Truth was to be found in quite a different arena.

10

Keeping in the direction indicated by signs of a silhouetted coach, I made my way to the bus station just by the main road outside the town. Although there were no buses or coaches, there was a reassuring assembly of travellers. I was unable to get past a group of bulls who had converged, stomping and disputing, in front of the bus timetable and so could not decide which bus to take. A small dragon in an official cap and overcoat was standing by a poster promoting holidays in the Illicit Republics. I contemplated approaching him to ask where the buses were heading, but I was somewhat intimidated by the smoke billowing from his nostrils.

I looked around in some perplexity. Where should I go next? And would I be travelling nearer to or further away from the Truth? I stood on the tip of my toes and scanned the depots in the hope of seeing some helpful signs or indicators. A Gryphon approached me, carrying a newspaper under his claws. “You look lost, young man. Can I be of help?”

“I was just wondering where the buses went from here.”

The Gryphon cawed slightly. “Is that all? Well, I can assure you they go to quite a few destinations. And if you are willing to transfer, you will be able to reach any point on the globe you choose. Where is it that you actually want to go?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted with embarrassment.

“You’re not sure? You must have some idea. It is just not possible for one to have no destination at all. Do you want to go to the Suburbs? To Lambdeth? To the City? To the Country?”

“Lambdeth sounds a very agreeable destination.”

“And indeed it is. The great University city of our fair land. The seat of learning and the font of knowledge. Is that where you want to go?”

“Yes!” I said decisively.

“Well, let’s have a look at the timetable if our bovine friends will just allow us to squeeze through...” The Gryphon approached the company of bulls, many wearing cheerful straw boaters and scarves, and with a few polite and firm *excuse mes*, he made his way to the front and gazed up at the timetable finding instruction from its seemingly arcane symbols. He placed a claw on the back of a bullock, with the newspaper headline (**Red Victory Likely**) prominent. His other claw traced a route across the columns of destinations and times.

“There’s a bus to Lambdeth Central in just a few minutes from bay number...” his eyes gazed up at the headings, “...bay number Nine. The same bay where my bus is leaving in fact. But a little later than yours, I’m afraid.” He squeezed back out past the broad backs of the bulls. “Now the next thing is to buy a ticket. I trust you have sufficient for the journey. It’ll cost you nine shillings and nine pence.”

The Gryphon led me along to the ticket office window where another dragon took my two crowns in his claw and hesitated over a groat, before handing me three pennies as change. “Are you sure you only want a single?” he wondered. “The return fare is only a shilling more expensive.”

“No, that’s fine,” I replied returning with the Gryphon to a bay where the huge number **9** was displayed, but no list of destinations. We sat on the narrow flap-down seats, and the Gryphon unfolded and refolded his newspaper. The headlines tantalised my eyes during this rather fastidious process: **Whites Certain to Win Suburbs.**

Illicit Gains Spider Vote. Blacks Threaten Immigrants. A diverse selection of other passengers were lined up on the plastic seats or stood guard by their luggage. There were a few jocund bullocks; a young woman in a long green overcoat; an elderly dragon with a pitifully thin column of sulphurous smoke trailing from his nostrils; a diprotodon in a dapper three-piece suit; a snowman sweating in the mid-afternoon heat; a turtle in a bonnet with a basket of eggs; and a large black swan.

“There are quite a few heading to Baldam,” I remarked to the Gryphon.

He frowned slightly, wagging his large tufted ears. “I’d be very surprised indeed if very many were going to Baldam, however attractive a destination it may be. Most will, like me, be catching the following bus, which is for the City. More people go to and from the City than any other destination, so statistically I would assume so too is the majority of this motley crew.”

“Do you live in the City?”

“Goodness no! Although I have been tempted by the pay and availability of work. I’m a teacher, young man. I teach at a school in a town perhaps nine leagues from here. I teach Mathematics and General Science at a Lower Secondary Modern. I have been enticed by the opportunity to teach at a City Grammar School or perhaps even one in Baldam, but my wife and children are happy where they are so relocation is quite unlikely for the moment.”

“What’s your school like?”

“A very ordinary school, young man. With a very ordinary syllabus: Latin, Greek, Home Economics, Physical Education, Geography. Not very different, I imagine, from the school you attended.”

“Perhaps,” I replied, reflecting that none of my teachers had beaks, wings and

leonine tails. "I suppose schools are much the same wherever you go..."

"Well, you're showing your ignorance there, young man. As a result of the incoherence of the Coition government's education policies there's quite a *free-for-all* of approved syllabi in this nation. Boroughs are at liberty to institute any model of education they wish. In this town, for instance, the children are not so much educated as indoctrinated. And indoctrinated it seems to me in the most appalling nonsense that there ever was. There are boroughs dominated by one or other of the multitude of churches where even such basic facts as the law of evolution, the principle of genetics, the curvature of space and Gödel's Theorem are denied them. I abhor education which seeks not so much to enlighten as to conceal."

The Gryphon snorted his distaste and reorganised his newspaper. **Whites May Lose Out to Blacks**, I briefly glimpsed. **Reds Get The Blues**, another headline ambiguously announced.

"The objectives of education are forever perverted by ideological or religious prejudice. Education isn't simply to fit students into a mould determined by national or local government. It has the much nobler task of adapting future citizens to an unpredictable future and inculcate values of common decency and virtue without which the realm will degenerate into ignorance and dullness. It is education's duty to anticipate the changes ahead and ensure that the student has the appropriate grounding in Ancient Latin, Classical Mythology or Euclidean Geometry to confront that future.

"Undoubtedly, education must also pertain to ethical instruction. Without moral guidance, who is to say what degrees of amorality may pervade in the future? I would hate to see any pupil of mine ignorant of the proper rules of etiquette; lacking appreciation and respect for their elders and betters. I despair of the so-called *modern*

schools in the City which provide not even the minimum of moral guidance, complying with anarchistic doctrines that assert that the pupil's character is like a flower that blossoms when abandoned to free expression. Such a flower will simply be swamped by weeds and be a very sorry sight indeed."

"Aren't there other reasons for education?" I questioned, finding the Gryphon's views remarkably similar to those held by teachers in the Suburbs.

"Yes, indeed," the Gryphon agreed, thoughtfully scratching the feathers on his chin with a claw. "There is the provision of an educated and skilled workforce. What hope has any society unless it has the army of doctors, lawyers, accountants, clerks, estate agents, teachers and Classics scholars that all societies need?"

The Gryphon paused to further re-organise his newspaper. He smoothed it flat with a claw so that the half-finished crossword faced upwards. He looked back at me. "Where is it that you come from, young man?"

"The Suburbs."

"I guessed so. People from there are very distinctive. But you don't find many of them so far away as this. So, why have you left the Suburbs? Are you considering settling down in the fair city of Lambdeth?"

"No, I'm actually on a quest. A quest for the Truth."

"The Truth? You're not an Illicitist are you?"

"No, not at all. I was intent on finding the Truth before I was aware that anyone else was interested."

"Is that so? I must say it is a most curious endeavour for someone from the Suburbs to engage in. But as they say, it takes all sorts! Even in the Suburbs there must be some with a penchant for the crazy, the futile and the misguided. My advice to

you, young man, is simply to abandon your quest now, take your bus to Lambdeth and, after a short holiday, return to the Suburbs. You will never find the Truth by travelling about the nation by omnibus.”

“Is it totally futile?” I asked, discomfited by the Gryphon’s apparent common sense.

“In the way you’re going about it ... frankly, yes!” The Gryphon lowered his eyes to his crossword, hummed softly and then returned his gaze to me. “The Truth, young man, is not a physical thing that you can just go off and look for, whatever these fanatics in this town may say. The Truth is nothing more and nothing less than the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the ages: exactly what I am paid to impart to my pupils and with which they will carry on the noble tradition of imparting the same wisdom to future generations. The Truth is just a convenient term for the knowledge gathered under such more precise headings as English Literature, Trigonometry, Algebra, Political Geography, Inorganic Chemistry and Religious Education. There is nothing mystical, fantastic or exotic about the Truth. It doesn’t wait for us in a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. It doesn’t live with the fairies at the bottom of the garden (and they have assured me of that!) It is something to be unearthed only after long hours of dedicated study and research, poring over books in libraries, taking notes in lectures and doing the exercises attached to the end of every text book chapter.”

“Is the Truth really as dull as all that?”

“It is. It must be. It is prosaic, unexciting and unremarkable.”

“Is it possible to know all the Truth there is to know?”

“Of course not. Well not for anyone of your species or mine, although no doubt the boffins are working hard at inventing machines which could store all the

knowledge that currently exists and all that may exist in the future. What they would make of such an enormous amount of knowledge, I don't know. So, if you still seek the Truth, take advantage of your visit to Lambdeth and ensconce yourself in the university library."

The Gryphon sighed and looked at the company gathered around the bus station. He discreetly indicated the woman in the green overcoat who was reading a magazine on her lap. "Do you recognise her at all, young man?"

I scrutinised the woman carefully. She was too engrossed in her magazine to notice that we were watching her. "No, I can't say I do."

"I may be wrong, and I am definitely not an expert on these matters, but I believe she's a film actress. But what she's doing here, I don't know!"

"A film actress! Are you sure?"

"Not at all. But if she is the actress I think then she makes her living from displaying her naked body to the prurient and dissolute. An immoral and shameless harlot."

"A pornographic actress?"

"No less! And what more disgusting occupation can there be? Other than prostitution of course. Spreading filth and low morals to the weak minded and the easily led. Totally perverting the moral purpose and æsthetic value of her profession. I have often had to confiscate pornographic material from my pupils and I am certain that her face is one I have seen in magazines about the pornographic film industry. Well, not certain, but the likeness is rather remarkable."

"Is that so?"

Although fairly attractive there was nothing about the way she dressed or

behaved that would lead me to suspect this.

“Pornography is just one thing about modern film and theatre I find impossible to condone. And it is not merely the nature of pornography I find unacceptable, but the way it has demeaned the noble theatrical tradition represented by Shakespeare, the author of **Titus Andronicus** and **The Rape of Lucretia**. Theatre should raise the sensibilities of the audience with unambiguous moral messages and refined æstheticism. It is, or should be, an educational tool to supplement the pedagogical tradition in moulding the character. It is both instruction and a joy to those in full possession of their critical faculties.”

“What are those?”

“An ability to penetrate the superficialities of the story and action to see the moral truths expressed therein. Without this the audience is merely entertained, and not instructed.”

“Is that such a very bad thing?”

“Yes, it is, young man!” The Gryphon insisted, indicating a poster for a film, **Georgia Brown and the City of the Undead**, amongst the political propaganda. “Films like that, promising nothing more than sex, violence and action, beget a culturally illiterate population, who believe life is nothing more than a sequence of events lacking moral significance and in which the most disgusting and unwholesome activities are routine. It trades on being entertainment, when in truth it is a perversion of even that term. How can it be *entertainment* when it features violence, death, sexual perversion, crime and gross horror?”

“Perhaps the film isn’t aspiring to be art.”

“Only film and theatre aspiring to art is ever worth making. And if it fails to

achieve any artistic value, it should not have been made at all. I cannot accept that any creative endeavour should aspire to merely divert. That is such a sad waste of effort.”

At that moment, a double-decker bus pulled into the bay with the words **Lambdeth Central** prominently displayed above the driver’s cabin. The doors of the bus opened with an exhalation of air and several people disembarked. Then, after bidding farewell to the Gryphon who continued to wait for his own bus, I queued up behind a couple of bullocks in straw hats who were being escorted in by a diminutive dragon in an official uniform. Once they had filed down to the front of the lower deck, I entered the bus and climbed up to the totally empty upper deck. I walked down the aisle to sit at the front, shaded by the tinted green glass of the windows, and stretched out my legs.

While waiting for the bus to stir and gazing at the Gryphon reading his newspaper, I heard another person clamber up the stairs and stumble down the aisle. I turned my head round to see who it was and saw the woman in the green overcoat the Gryphon had been discussing. She smiled at me, and slumped in the seat across the aisle from me.

“Are you off to Lambdeth Central too?” she asked, crossing her long legs demurely.

“Yes, I am. I’ve never been there before.”

“No? Well there’s a first time for everything.” She shook the blonde hair that flowed onto her shoulders and ran her fingers through it from her temples. “Did I hear you and your Gryphon friend talking about me at the bus stop?”

I blushed slightly. “Yes. He thought you were a film actress...”

“...And a pornographic one at that, too, I suppose? Well, your friend is right,

I'm afraid. I am an actress. And a good living it is too! I gathered also from what I heard your friend was saying (so loudly and clearly!) that he believes film and theatre is all about art and education. He seems to think that it can never be entertainment."

"I think he was saying something like that."

"How amusing. I suppose that all of life is some kind of school lesson? How jolly dull! Why *can't* things just be fun? Why *can't* we do something just because it's enjoyable? If we only ever do something because we think it's good for us or because we might learn something from it, it merely debases life, which *must* contain an element of fun in it."

"I think the Gryphon was also saying that film and theatre shouldn't *just* entertain..."

"He did, did he?" mused the Actress as the bus's quietly purring engine changed its tone and the bus moved slowly out of the depot. It curved and cornered onto the main road, leaving behind Bay Number 9, where another bus was manoeuvring in. It sped along black tarmac past fields of cattle, wheat and barley, demarcated by tall trees with white-painted trunks which filed past with the same regularity as the white markings in the centre of the road.

"Your Gryphon friend has a point, though," admitted the Actress. "Whether films or plays aspire to be art or entertainment is irrelevant, they will always inculcate values into the audience. It is the task of those involved in their production, in whatever capacity, to be aware of these values however deeply hidden they may be. It is quite simply everyone's moral and political duty to ensure not only that their principles are not compromised, but that they are furthered in whatever work they do."

"Are you saying that films should be like propaganda?"

“Intentionally or not all films, all art and all creative enterprises are propaganda. They reinforce the cultural and social structures which led to their creation. It is an inevitable and inescapable aspect of everything one does. In my performances I always try to further my views on the rights of women; the struggle of the working classes; the value and vulnerability of the environment; and the self-determination of all species. It may have to be done subtly in the context of the rôles I play, within the constraints of the script and the athleticism and pathos the part demands. But it is there nonetheless.”

“So you do believe that film is a kind of propaganda.”

“In a way. But only insofar that film cannot avoid being so. And usually the message generated is really nothing more than a restatement of the comforting status quo, reinforcing the principles of the film financiers and the target audience.”

The Actress smiled disarmingly and laid down a copy of her magazine, **The Struggle**, the cover of which featured a picture of a figure huddled in a blanket in the entrance to a shop with the words **Homeless and Hungry!** scrawled on a piece of cardboard. “I’m sorry to go on like this. I just get so jolly fed up when I hear people like your Gryphon friend going on about things he really doesn’t know anything about. But on a different note: who have you voted for in the General Election?”

“I haven’t voted for anyone,” I had to admit. “The General Election wasn’t very well advertised in the Suburbs.”

“Typical White Party indecisiveness, I imagine. And if that’s where you come from, and judging from the way you dress I can’t imagine it being anywhere else, there isn’t much point in voting for anything other than White or Blue unless you want to waste your vote. Parties like the Reds and the Greens don’t have the smallest chance

there.”

“No, they don’t.” I agreed. “Nobody in the Suburbs votes for either of them.”

“Not like the City or Baldam where the Red Party almost always triumphs. I imagine people in the Suburbs simply agree with the general misrepresentation of the Red Party: that they will immediately shut down the Stock Exchange, nationalise all industries, depose Her Maphrodite and instantly impose punitive taxation on the rich.”

“Isn’t that just exactly what the Red Party wants to do?”

“All socialists, including me, would like to see the capitalist system replaced by a fairer system which focuses on the needs of the poor and the most disadvantaged, rather than perpetuate the injustices which make such a misery of the lives of those least able to defend themselves. All socialists are affronted by a system of patronage which permits wealth to be amassed by those like Her Maphrodite who have gained it entirely by virtue of birth. All socialists want a more equitable distribution of wealth and power. But the Red Party represents a very broad amalgamation of socialist, communist, anarcho-syndicalist and social democratic interests, and although individual comrades may have opinions and views much more radical than others, the Party is committed to a gradualist reformist policy. It would not do in a society as complex and integrated as ours to make changes that are too sudden and too radical. Experience has shown that the immediate satisfaction it might give to the more far left members of the party is more than outweighed by the distrust and lack of co-operation it engenders in society as a whole. And a true socialist utopia cannot be achieved without the full approval and commitment of all members of society.”

“Are those your views?”

“If they are the views of the political bureau of the Red Party then as a

comrade in the struggle towards a fair and just society they will be my views as well. The Red Party will not gain power if it does not present a unified and coherent front, attractive to all factions of the working class and unlikely to alienate too large a proportion of the *bourgeoisie*. Once in power, it will not hold onto it for very long if it does not consolidate its support. Otherwise, the socialist revolution is lost before it has even begun.”

The Actress studied me carefully. “I know that you’re unlikely to vote for the Red Party. It would be incredible that anyone from the Suburbs would vote for the relief of poverty and prejudice they have never witnessed and will never suffer from. So, what are you doing here on a bus to Lambdeth so many leagues from the Suburbs? Why haven’t you stayed behind and voted in the General Election?”

“I’m on a quest for the Truth.”

The Actress raised her eyebrows in surprise. “That’s a jolly odd thing for someone from the Suburbs to be doing! The Truth! Flipping heck! It must be a jolly fashionable thing to do these days. These flipping Illicitists are searching for it I believe. Are you in the Illicit Party?”

“Not at all. I just think it’s a worthwhile thing to do.”

The Actress smiled wanly. She leaned forward, her overcoat opening to reveal a plunging neckline and a pearl necklace. “I really don’t agree with you. The search for the Truth is diversionary and counter-productive. And anyway, I just don’t believe it can ever be found.”

“Surely if it exists, it can be found.”

“Even if that were true, I would like to know how anyone could ever be sure that what they’d found was actually the Truth. How can you be sure that it is not

something that merely looks like the blooming Truth, walks like the Truth but is merely masquerading as the Truth? And even if one could be sure, even if it could be verified as the Truth by some expert, or had a label attached to it reading **The Truth, The Universe and Everything**, or if the certainty of the Truth was intrinsic in its own discovery, what then? What do you do with it? Is it going to feed people? Or house them? Or solve all the terrible problems of war, pestilence, plague and famine that trouble the world?

“If the Truth exists, it’s always been there, and doesn’t need to be found to alleviate the world’s ills. In fact, if the Truth were ever found, by you or anyone else, it would become just yet another expensive luxury stored at colossal expense in a museum or research institute, further diverting attention from the needs of the underprivileged, the underdeveloped and the undernourished. Even the search for it merely diverts valuable resources away from where they are needed. Surely, it is better to sort out all that which is wrong in this world before leaping ahead and looking for things of interest only to philosophers, scientists and academics.”

“You don’t believe that my quest is at all worthwhile.”

The Actress laughed kindly. “I don’t wish to down-hearten you too much. You do exactly what you like. You’re only one individual, and what you do isn’t really going to change very much. Even if you do find the Truth, which I frankly doubt. However, if you think that you’re going to find it in Lambdeth Central, you’d better steel yourself as I believe it’s just coming up!”

I looked out of the window and noticed that the bus was no longer speeding along past fields or forests, but along a series of raised roadways around which were tall buildings and warehouses. The view was dominated by enormous hoardings, neon-

lit product names, traffic lights soaring above and road signs. The roar of the bus's engine was partly obscured by that of other traffic passing above it, below it, and on either side. Then, sure enough, the bus turned off the main motorway, descended down and around a loop of roads, through a tunnel illuminated by the message **Lambdeth Central Welcomes Careful Drivers** and finally drew to a halt at a bus station attached to a much larger railway station.

The buildings all around were constructed of plastic, steel, glass and concrete. People swarmed around escalators, elevators, robots, blinking lights and small trucks. "So, here we are!" announced the Actress, standing up. "It's been jolly nice meeting you. I'm off to the City now, but I hope you enjoy your stay in Lambdeth. I warn you though. It may be a pleasant sort of place, but it's no utopia!"

11

Lambdeth Central was quite simply the largest railway station I had ever seen. Several times larger than any in the Suburbs. Indeed, it was like a complete town: consisting of a network of pubs, caf  s, shops and amusement arcades. Quite clearly it was designed to divert those expecting to wait several hours for their next train. I wasn't at all sure whether this reflected on the frequency of the services or the likelihood of there being delays. Amongst all this provision and behind the electronic indicator boards, were the numbered platforms where trains of all kinds were waiting on distinctly different railway gauges, some purring menacingly with the apparent ability to exceed the speed of sound while remaining terrestrially bound, whilst others puffed cheerful clouds of smoke from coal-filled furnaces.

The station was not crowded, although it was in the midst of the evening commuter rush, and many of the waiting passengers seemed to have only a passing interest in the trains. There were oxen sitting on specially designed seats; a couple of serpentine centipedes reading newspapers; a dire wolf selling magazines in a stall to a boa constrictor who rather ingeniously managed to both pay for a magazine and then hold it open to read; a dimetrodon hastened by with his umbrella in his mouth; and a hippogriff was engaged in selling lottery tickets behind a large model of a blobby pink figure with yellow spots.

There was quite enough to see at the railway station, without venturing through the main entrance past the squawking sparrows and pigeons into the university city itself. I could see the tall stone buildings, the clocks ticking with civic pride on

ornate towers and a flurry of black gowns and mortar boards on bicycles. For the moment, however, I was more interested in finding something to eat, or at least a coffee to drink.

I wandered along the station grounds, peering at the signs to find a place that sold food and drink rather than compact discs, lawn mowers, magazines and fluffy toys with I © Baldam written on them. I carefully trod over the length of an anaconda lying rather untidily outside a Ye olde Croissants shop, and when I looked up after this difficult manoeuvre I saw a familiar figure waving at me and running in my direction.

It was Anna, whose hair was now very short, with massive hooped earrings dangling from her ears, light-weight floral cotton shorts and a very loose white tee-shirt barely long enough to cover her midriff. “Flipping heck! We keep meeting!” she exclaimed. “One moment in Endon and the next in Lambdeth Central. So, are you still with that oversized grasshopper?”

“No. I last saw him at a party a long way from here.”

“Well!” Anna exclaimed again. She looked at me and around her, apparently not quite sure what to do. “Where are you going now?”

“I’m looking for somewhere to eat. I feel quite hungry.”

“That’s a *super* idea! Let’s go to one of the cafés here ... Let’s see ...” She stood on her sandaled toes and scanned the station. “Let’s go to an Uncle Joe’s. They do pretty good kirsch and I wouldn’t mind sharing a samovar with you.” She pointed to a café promoted by a very avuncular character with a thick moustache and a collarless jacket, just between a Big Frank’s Frankfurters and a Chinese take-away. We strolled towards it across the plastic carton littered expanse and were

welcomed in by a small bull with a ring through his nose and a plastic hat on his head. He escorted us to a table by a window that looked out past the cardboard figure of a cheerful Uncle Joe to a waiting steam train.

I was somewhat undecided as to which of the rather unfamiliarly entitled items on the menu to order. There was never so much variety or choice in the Suburbs. Anna, however, was considerably more knowledgeable than me and with her assistance I selected something that approximated to a steak and chips, while Anna ordered a samovar for us to drink from. I was glad that she was knowledgeable of the ceremonies and procedures associated with such a strange kind of teapot.

“You’ve changed your hairstyle,” I commented while Anna poured out the first cup of tea. “It’s much shorter.”

“Well, that’s fashion for you, dear! I’m only away from here for such a jolly short time and it’s *all change*! A girl can’t stand still for an instant in the modern world! You leave it for a little while and when you get back you have to be jolly quick to avoid looking like yesterday’s news!”

“Where have you been visiting?” I asked as Anna put down the samovar and I picked up my blisteringly hot cup. My lips were scorched by the liquid, so I left it to cool for a few moments.

“Oh! Here and there! Well, you *know* where I’ve been! I’ve been to the Suburbs amongst other places: and a more blinking tedious place you couldn’t imagine! Yes, I know you come from there - you poor thing - but a girl’s got to have an opinion! I had ever so much difficulty finding somewhere to stay there. You just wouldn’t believe the number of bed and breakfast hotels which were full, despite having **Vacancies** signs outside! I don’t think I’ll be going back to the Suburbs in a

hurry! Meeting you there was almost the highlight of my visit. Having seen other places, do you think you'll be hurrying back to live in the Suburbs again?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "The Suburbs is where I come from and where my home is."

"I suppose that's true. But it's not for me, I'm afraid. I much prefer it here. Or in the City which is where I'd been visiting before the Suburbs. And in comparison to the City, the Suburbs are *bound* to be blinking dull! Now, there's a place to go! If it wasn't so flipping expensive that's where I'd live. It's about twice as expensive as here. Six guineas ten shillings for a cup of tea for instance! There's just *so* much to do there, but I was feeling jolly poor after a few days, I can tell you. In comparison to the City, Lambdeth is almost as dull as the Suburbs. Well! That's exaggerating! But you know what I mean. And as well as the City I've been to the Country, and what could be more of a contrast. All that oxygen! It really makes you feel like a new person. All those fields, forests, lakes and things. If I didn't like city life so much, I'd live there! What do you think?"

"I'm sure it would be very nice," I said.

"And cheap as well! I felt like a blooming millionaire. I could pick up a bit of cash here or in the City, working as a waitress or something, and afford to spend most of the year in a little cottage by a lake or in the mountains or by the sea. I'd be able to live like a queen, as long as I'd be able to go back and earn a bit more. On the other hand, there's so little to do. The Suburbs may be dull, but so too is the Country! Some parts of the Country haven't experienced civilised life at all. Heaven only knows which century they belong to. Still in the eleventh century. But if there's anywhere I'd *never* live, however much you paid me, and that's that horrible borough of Divinity. Wasn't

it dreadful?”

“It wasn’t very friendly,” I admitted, remembering the unwelcoming way Anna had been treated.

She smiled sadly, picked up a cup in her hands and raised it to her lips as the single golden bangle slipped down her bare black wrist.

“That’s putting it jolly mildly. It was the most unfriendly place I’ve *ever* visited! I’ve still got that pamphlet they threw at me. Friends of mine in Baldam just can’t believe there are people like that. It’s only a couple of days since I was there, and I’m still jolly relieved I got out. Those humourless religious fanatics. They must lead the most dreadful lives! If they didn’t like me for being a black woman, the dickens only knows what they’d think of the waiter there,” she indicated the bull who was idly standing at the bar with a cigarette in his mouth, “and as for those snakes at the table over there! Well! I’ve heard about the snake in the Garden of Eden. They’d probably just skin them alive if they ever saw them, don’t you think?”

“You may be right,” I admitted. “They had a very low opinion of animals.”

“And some lower than others, I bet!” Anna shook her head and sipped thoughtfully from her cup. An earring rang hollowly against the cup as she leaned forward. “Well, now we’re in Lambdeth. My home town! What do you think of it?”

“I’ve only just arrived. I’ve only seen the railway station.”

“Pretty impressive, isn’t it! Almost as good as the ones in the City. There are a few cinemas and even a night club on the premises. Baldam’s a really impressive borough. There’s not just the university. The borough spreads for miles. Much of it is suburban like where you come from, but not *nearly* so deadly dull. There is a much wider range of species for a start. And although some people commute every day to

the City, as they do from the Suburbs, most work in Lambdeth, which is quite a big city itself. Compared with the City, it's jolly tiny; but there's enough of it to keep *me* jolly content."

"Does its prosperity just come from the university?"

"I'm sure it jolly well helps. But it's not just the university. There are plenty of businesses based here. And then there's the cathedral. Quite an important religious centre, apparently."

"What's that like?"

"It's absolutely flipping monstrous. Not as big as the cathedrals in the City of course, but apparently more important. Pilgrims come from all over. I gather there's a lot of dispute between all the different religious groups as to which one has priority, but you expect it from that lot! They often have fights about who should worship when. Some of them jolly violent! People have been killed, I gather. But most of the time, the cathedral's a jolly serene place. I'm not religious, but I like going there. I feel *so* tiny and insignificant under its enormous dome. And although the organ music's a bit slow, it's flipping loud! I just love the statues and stained glass windows, although there are always religious fanatics that try to destroy them."

"Why do they do that?"

Anna shook her head. "Don't ask me! I'll never be able to understand these people. Some religious people, however, go dool alley over the icons and things. They light candles, bash their foreheads and go into raptures. Others think it's all idolatry and blasphemy. What can you say about such people?"

At that moment, the waiter returned to our table carrying our orders on a cleverly designed tray. The food was piping hot. Anna and I took our plates off the

tray with the gloves provided and placed them on the table mats in front of us. I looked at my serving uncertainly, but Anna had no reservation about attacking hers.

“It’s lovely!” she exclaimed, her face distorted by a bulge of food in her cheek. “You’ll love it!”

I tucked in hesitantly, and found it very tasty if a little rich. However, after so many exotic meals recently it wasn’t long until I was eating with the same relish as Anna. A bottle of red house wine was also added to the bill, after Anna had attracted the waiter’s attention. She poured me a glass and raising hers she prompted me with a “Cheers!”

I picked up my glass and sipped it, while Anna gazed at me. “You don’t seem to me a person who’s left the Suburbs much at all in your life. What are you doing here in Lambdeth?”

Lubricated by the wine and food, my tongue prattled on about my search for the Truth and the different advice I’d had: from the very hostile to the relatively enthusiastic. I confessed that it was only a small minority who’d extended any encouragement.

“I’m afraid I’m not one of those. It seems a jolly silly idea to me. I just can’t see any blinking point to it. After all, is the Truth going to feed anyone?” She raised another forkful of unidentifiable mush to her mouth, and chewing it continued to speak: “There’s *so* much famine and starvation in this world. Millions who haven’t got enough to eat. I *know*! I’ve seen it on telly. All those swollen tummies and sunken cheeks.” She put her forefinger and thumb into her mouth to remove a very stringy strand of something from between her teeth. “And if you can’t eat it, what are you going to do with it? Put it in a museum and look at it, maybe? That won’t make

anyone any happier.”

“Those who are searching for the Truth will be happier when it’s found.”

“Don’t be so sure! Most people will be jolly disappointed when they find the Truth is nothing like what they thought it was. Well, it’s *got* to be! There are so many different ideas of what the Truth is! And personally I think the Truth’s going to upset plenty of people who’ve never ever considered looking for it. It’s only my opinion mind, but the Truth is going to make everyone feel rather desolate. I think the universe will just seem a jolly sight more unfriendly and purposeless than it does now. Every new thing they find out about *does* make it seem a lot more discomfiting, don’t you think? Black holes. Polydimensional superstrings. Curved time. Uncertainty principles. Doesn’t it just make you shiver?”

“Surely knowing that for sure will affect how people behave?”

“I don’t flipping believe it! Too many people like to think whatever they like whatever you say to them. Tell them it’s day and they’ll say it’s night. Tell them that one and one make two, and they’ll insist it makes three. The Truth might be there - undeniable and incontrovertible - but there’ll still be people who’ll say the world is flat, that the moon is made of green cheese and that pigs can fly. I know! I know! There are pigs that *can* fly, but only the ones with wings. And they’re not proper pigs anyway!”

Anna chewed thoughtfully on another forkful of food, and washed it down with a sip of wine. She smiled at me. “Come! Don’t look so downcast!” she remarked patting the back of my hand. “You do what you like. Don’t be put off by me! If I were you, and I were searching for it, I’d take my trusty sword and vorpal blade and head off to the City. If there’s anywhere you’d find anything, it’d be there, rather than in a *much* smaller place like this!”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh! I’m *certain*! Pay your fare at that kiosk there and get a one-way ticket to the City. It’ll be expensive mind you: and that’s just the cost of getting there. But you’ve *got* to visit the City once in your life! And your jolly little quest seems the ideal excuse.”

“What’s the City like?”

“Didn’t we chat about the City in the Suburbs? But there the City seemed such a distant and unreal place. Even here, it seems pretty much unbelievable! It’s quite simply the most jolly exciting place there could possibly be! Ooh!” She splayed her hand dramatically to emphasise her wonderment. “It’s everything you could *possibly* want! Everything! They have these weekly listings magazines saying what’s going on: the cinemas, theatres, night clubs, opera houses, art galleries, museums! Everything! You couldn’t see and do everything you wanted in a whole lifetime in the City. Doesn’t it sound *jolly* exciting?”

“It does indeed,” I admitted.

Perhaps Anna was right. Perhaps a place with so much happening was exactly where I should be heading.

“I get *such* a flipping buzz from the City!” Anna enthused, mounting the last shreds of food onto her fork and pushing it into her mouth. She looked sadly at her now bare plate, holding her glass in one hand and a napkin in the other. She glanced around the café, at the snakes still chatting on one table and the waiter who leaned rather heavily against the till which was attended by a petite Australopithecus wearing heavy make-up over her face. “Some of the people here: I’m sure they’re from the City. But usually you just can’t tell. There’s just *everyone* in the City! All sorts.

Prostitutes. Gangsters. Millionaires. Royalty. Her Maphrodite as well, of course. The seat of government, commerce, culture, depravity, vice, virtue and literature. You name it. It's there! And *so many* people! So many millions and millions of people! Running backwards and forwards. To and fro. Hither and thither. Everywhere. If you think there's action here in Lambdeth (and after the Suburbs I'm *flipping* sure you do!) in the City you'll think this place is just *dead*."

I was still rather impressed by the grandeur and scale of Lambdeth Central. It was difficult to believe that there were really buildings which could truly dwarf this place.

"And after the Suburbs! My dear! *So* dull! The City is probably *just* the excitement you need in your life. It's *all* the excitement you'll *ever* need! I'm not saying the streets are paved with gold. Well, not all the streets, anyway. But there's money to be got. Things to do. Things to see. Okay! It's flipping expensive. The tiniest, dingiest little bedsit will cost you an absolute fortune. It's a Lambdeth salary to get a seat in the Opera Houses. Some restaurants will charge you more for the grubbiest, meanest piece of celery than **Uncle Joe's** will charge us for an entire meal. But if you're earning in the City, then, believe me, there's money to be made. And *real* money. Millions and millions of guineas! So, if I were you, I'd head straight off now. Don't bother with tiny little university city Lambdeth. Go where the *real* life is! Head to the City! Make a fortune! See and do everything you ever wanted."

"You make it sound very impressive!" I remarked, finally finishing my meal.

Anna picked up her glass and gazed through the café window at the hustle and bustle outside in the station. Even though the rush hour had finished there was enough activity to persuade the shops to stay open into the evening. There were some bullocks

in university gowns running by. A chameleon was shifting to match the kaleidoscope of colour given off by the lights of a gramophone record store.

Then I saw a more familiar figure stroll by, looking through the shop windows with an expression of intense curiosity. It was the still naked figure of Beta with her long hair trailing behind her and the soles of her feet conspicuously blackened by the station floor dirt. She frowned while looking through the window of **Big Frank's Frankfurters**, paused briefly and then stared directly at me through the window of **Uncle Joe's**. It was evident that she recognised me, but was somewhat hesitant that I recognised her. I smiled at her. She beamed back.

"You see someone you know?" wondered Anna turning her head round. "Oh! What a sweet girl! She must be from the Country dressed like that. Her hair! So unfashionable! Invite her in!"

Before I had a chance to do anything myself, she beckoned Beta to enter the café. She pushed open the glass door and strode in.

"I didn't know you were going to Lambdeth," she declared as she sat next to me. "I thought it was just Gotesdene you were going to. And who's your friend?"

I introduced the two women to each other, and explained how I had met Anna in many different places.

"It's very odd," I remarked.

"Oh, I don't know! I'm always meeting the same people all over the blinking place!" Anna remarked. "You do when you travel. But tell me, Beta, what's brought you so far from the Country? *It is* the Country you come from, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. Everyone seems to guess that here," Beta laughed. "It's my brother Bacon. He's enrolled at a college here. He thinks it's better to be a student in

Lambdeth than stay in the Village.”

“I don’t imagine you have many colleges where you come from.”

“There are a few but they’re all such a long way from home. But this is even further. *Much* further. It’s so busy here! And *so* many people! You could spend all day walking up and down the main roads and not meet anyone you know!”

“If you think *this* is busy, Beta, you should visit the City. I’ve just been telling your friend here how jolly *super* the place is. It’s to Lambdeth what Lambdeth is to the Village!”

Beta smiled sceptically. “I can’t believe the City is much bigger or more crowded than this. How can it be?”

“It can. And if you don’t believe me you ought to go there and find out for yourself. In fact, I’ve just been trying to persuade this young man here to go there on his search for the Truth.”

“Is that so?” marvelled Beta with a warm friendly smile. “That sounds a wonderful thing to do! Do you think you’ll find it there?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Anna says if it’s anywhere, it’ll be there.”

“Of course, it is. No doubt about it! But, Beta, what have you been doing in Lambdeth? Have you been here long?”

“Only a couple of days. Just long enough to see that Bacon, my brother, was happy in his digs and that he could find his way about. I’ve met some of the other students on his course, visited the cathedral, looked at the university, and just got to know the city.”

“So what do you think of my home town?”

“I like it,” Beta enthused thoughtfully. “I don’t know that I’d want to live here

permanently, mind, but it's what Bacon wants and I'd love to visit him here again. Even if he *is* argumentative!" She smiled to remind me of his conversation on the train to Gotesdene.

"Argumentative?" wondered Anna, leaning forward.

"Oh, he just thinks everything modern is good and everything traditional is bad. That's why he's come here. To get away from a traditional way of life."

"Tradition! You can't get away from it here any more than you can in the Country. Or for that matter in the City. It's everywhere. The cathedral's tradition. The university's tradition. I imagine what your brother wants is a place where there's a modern world as well as the traditional, but even the modern world has a history. It didn't spring from thin air, you know!"

"I'm not sure I'm that keen on the modern world, really. It's very exciting, though. I like all the shops and the enormous concrete and steel buildings. But the roads are terribly congested and the air's so filthy. I just long for fresh air on my skin again."

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"I was thinking of going home. That's why I'm at the station. But I'm not really in such a big hurry to return to the Village. Being so far away is such a treat. I'd love to see more of the world."

"Go to the City then. See what the real modern world is like."

"I'd like to, Anna, but I'm frightened of going by myself. I'm sure people will take advantage of the fact that I'm a Country girl. Even here I feel really out of place. People ogle me and treat me as if I were stupid. It must be worse in the City."

"Oh! There's flipping everyone in the City! No one would look at you twice,

not with the range of species, nationalities and cultures crammed into the place. I'd give it a try if I were you."

Beta stared at the waiting trains. "It *is* very tempting! I just don't know, though."

"Well, don't take too long to make your mind up. Look! I'll settle the bill and be off now. I'm meeting some friends of mine. I don't know what we'll do, but I'm sure it'll be fun."

"Surely I should pay," I protested.

"Don't be silly! If you're going to the City you'll need all the flipping money you have. No, you two stay here and finish the wine. There's still a glass or two left!" Anna attracted the bull's attention with the flash of a plastic card embellished by the holographic image of her face dancing on the surface. He compared the holograph with the real thing, and then slid the card through a reading device he carried in his hand which flashed up the digits **£79 19/9d**: a sum of money considerably greater than I'd anticipated. Anna's face showed no expression, though Beta's flashed with alarm.

Anna stood up, kissed me tenderly on the cheeks and then hurried out into the station foyer and off into the distance. Beta sidled round to the other side of the table.

"Seventy Nine Pounds Nineteen Shillings and Nine pence!" she gasped. "More than Seventy Five Guineas! A meal and a bottle of wine would cost less than a groat in the Village. If there were any restaurants there, of course." She smiled back at me. "But it's wonderful to see a friendly face again! I was terribly afraid of being all alone in this place. It's so frightening and intimidating!"

Beta poured wine into an empty glass and sipped it while staring thoughtfully at the station. "If there are all sorts in the City, what sorts could there be that aren't in

this place. I just didn't believe there was such variety on even the whole planet. What do you think?"

"I haven't ventured out of the railway station yet," I admitted.

"You haven't? You can't have been here very long! You ought to at least see the cathedral if you ever get the chance. It's absolutely colossal! It's quite the biggest thing I've ever seen! The church in the Village could fit inside and there'd be loads of space above and around it. And such a lot of people there. You wouldn't believe there were so many religious types about. Some wore brightly coloured clothes, shaking bowls of incense and chanting. Some were bowing right down to the ground, covering their clothes with dirt, and wailing. Some just sat around trembling and shaking as if in some kind of a fit. There were a few visitors like me, really not at all bothered to pray or chant or anything like that, admiring the icons, the tombstones and all the little chapels dedicated to different Saints. There are shops and stalls where you can buy rosaries, beads, postcards, books and fluffy toys. There are several model sets of the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and a vicious looking snake wrapped round an apple tree. There are fluffy models of asses and a scale model of the golden calf. Are there cathedrals or churches like that in the Suburbs?"

"Nothing like that at all. Most of the churches are neglected and in danger of falling down. Religion isn't that popular in the Suburbs, although a few sects ring the doorbell to ask for contributions."

"Religion's still very important in the Village. We often receive itinerant preachers and all the villagers come out to hear them preach. With only one television in the whole Village, it's quite a treat. The preachers can be quite fanatic, talking about hell and damnation, fire and brimstone, but none as fanatic as a really horrid group of

pilgrims I met in the cathedral. I hope I *never* meet them again!”

“What was so bad about them?”

Beta frowned as she recalled the encounter. “They were *so* abusive. It was by this chapel dedicated to Saint Rénè Descartes. I hadn’t even known the philosopher had been sanctified and to be honest I don’t believe he was *that* famous for leading a religious life. But there it was: in a dark corner of the cathedral just by this painting of the Lord Krishna on a white cow (and I’ve no idea what that was doing there!) And in the chapel were nearly a dozen men in dark cloaks with hoods that completely covered their faces. It looked rather spooky so I just stood there and stared as they bowed and prayed silently in front of this very plain altar decorated only by a gruesome image of Christ on the Cross.

“One of them noticed me, and he and three of his companions approached me. They weren’t at all polite. They told me I should be thoroughly ashamed of myself in shaming consecrated ground by dressing so immodestly. Indeed wearing nothing at all. They told me I was a shameless harlot and a whore who should shave off my hair, which they said was nothing better than blasphemous vanity, and cover every inch of my shameless flesh. Well, I know that in Lambdeth there aren’t many people who dress like me, but in the Village nobody wears clothes. It’s just not thought necessary. Nobody had ever accused me of being a prostitute before and no one in Lambdeth has been nearly as rude. In fact, nakedness and long hair were only two things I was meant to be ashamed of. I was sinning by even being out in public, as these fanatics believe that all women should be locked out of sight for good, so as not to tempt Good Christians away from the light. Have you ever heard such nonsense?”

“I’ve heard opinions like that. Anna had stones thrown at her by people like

that.”

“Had she? How horrid! But I’m sure these fanatics would have done the same to me if they’d been allowed. And anyway I was far from the only naked person in the cathedral. This pilgrim told me that even the smallest display of flesh was considered sinful as it promoted lust and pride. That’s probably why they wear such clothes. He also said that even modestly dressed women were an abomination. Honestly! If I’m an abomination, what on earth isn’t?”

Beta looked at her half-empty glass with concern. She brushed a lock of green hair off her face.

“He told me that my shamelessness had already condemned me to an eternity in hell and that my soul could never be saved: however many prayers and confessions I made; however penitent I was; however many pilgrimages and fasts I undertook. He said that I would face an eternity in which my eyes would be carved out of my face, mushed to a pulp and then reinserted. That I would be frozen to temperatures marginally above absolute zero and that my limbs would congeal in the intense cold. I would then be roasted, causing my hair to blaze, my skin to blister and peel off, and my pubic hairs to flame in perpetual agony. My body would be hung, drawn and quartered; and then reassembled to begin again. Knives and spears would be thrust through every orifice of my body transporting me to agony as my internal organs emerged at the end of these instruments. I would be raped, ravaged, eaten and tortured forever and ever. I would be hung by my extremities from great heights and then dropped at great velocity. Have you ever heard such an obscene list of punishments?”

“How did you get away?”

“I was terrified. I was just rooted to the spot and couldn’t move, as these

pilgrims went on and on: tormenting me by recounting all the horrid things that would happen. How I would be sawn in half by blunt saws. How I would be forced to eat my own entrails. But a priest, a bull with a tall hat and golden gown, told them to leave me alone or be expelled from the cathedral. He was *very* stern. How can people be *so* beastly! I reckon that if they had their way they wouldn't wait until I was condemned to hell, but would start subjecting me to all those horrid tortures in this life. I didn't believe Christians were supposed to feel so much hatred."

Beta was clearly distressed by the incident. She cupped her hands round her now empty glass and stared into it. A lock of hair gradually released itself from behind her ear and flopped down over her face, but she made no effort to replace it. She looked up with wide blue eyes.

"But the rest of the cathedral was lovely. You really ought to visit it."

"I'd like to, but at the moment I'm undecided whether to stay in Lambdeth or to follow Anna's advice and go to the City."

"Oh yes! I remember now. You're on a quest for the Truth, aren't you? All I can say is that I didn't see any sign of it. If there's anywhere in Lambdeth you'd expect to find the Truth it'd be the cathedral. And I didn't see it there. Anna's probably quite right. The City's a much more likely place to find the Truth. Anyway, how is your quest? Have you got a better idea of what it is and where it might be?"

"Not really. I've been given a lot of advice, but it's all been contradictory. In fact, some people have said the Truth doesn't exist. And others have said that the Truth might exist but that I couldn't possibly find it."

Beta smiled sympathetically, looking directly into my eyes. "I'm sure your quest is a good thing. It sounds so good and noble. I'm sure there can't be a better

one. Don't be disheartened! It's exactly the sort of thing I'd like to do."

"Is it?"

Beta frowned in self-reflection.

"Well, yes it is!" she answered positively. "Yes, I think it may well be. And now I'm here, so far from the Village and not really expected back at any particular time, it seems especially tempting. The Truth! What quest could be better than that? And even if I weren't to find it, there wouldn't be any harm in having tried." She smiled at me thoughtfully. "Perhaps I ought to go with you to the City and look with you there. What do you think?"

This proposal was totally unexpected. "It sounds a very good idea," I spluttered in reply. "Very good. I'm sure two people would have twice as much chance of success as one."

"Although if there's no chance of finding the Truth at all then we'd still not find it," remarked Beta with a grin. "Yes, now I think of it: a search like that would be very exciting. We could meet some really interesting people. Heroes striving out to do battle against evil and in pursuit of good. Across dry, dusty plains. Over windswept barren hills. Through thick dense jungle. Along the crowded, busy streets of the City. I can see myself peering out to the horizon, scanning in all directions to see if the Truth is in the East or the West, the North or the South. We could meet knights errant, lost princesses, buried treasure, and who knows what else! It sounds very exciting!"

Beta's wide-open eyes sparkled with the illumination of her imagination.

"It hasn't been nearly as exhilarating as that," I remarked, ruefully recalling an uncomfortable night's sleep in the open air. "But I *have* seen some interesting places I'd probably never have visited otherwise."

“Well, that sounds exciting enough. There’s so much more in this country than a life in the Village would suggest. Or even one spent in the Suburbs, I imagine. Are they really as tidy and well-organised as they say, with litter-bins on alternate lamp-posts and trees lining all the roads? Do all the houses have lawns, garages and security lights?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

“It sounds so tranquil and restful. And not a trace of poverty!” She slid out of her seat and stood up beside me, watched by the indolent gaze of the waiter. “Come on, then! Let’s head for the City before it gets any darker. With any luck we might find the Truth before night falls.”

I swiftly swallowed the rest of my wine and followed Beta out of Uncle Joe’s, across the station foyer to the ticket kiosks signposted in several languages and went to one of the clear glass cubicles advertised by the word **City**. Another glass cubicle proclaimed the word **Suburbs** and I felt some trepidation in not buying a ticket to take me back to the comfort and security of home. Some of the other ticket kiosks were somewhat more shabby and were for an itinerary of destinations in the Country that I’d never heard of.

A few people were ahead of us in the queue, but we patiently waited our turn, while Beta excitedly speculated about what the City had to offer. The ticket attendant, a cobra with a peaked hat, was surprised that neither Beta nor I had any credit cards, but he accepted a cheque which he slid it into a machine and asked me to sign a sheet of clear plastic card on the counter. As I wrote, my signature was embossed onto the cheque and the figure of £111 1/2d was inserted.

“Surely it’s not that far to the City!” Beta gasped.

“Special evening one-way concessions,” the attendant hissed amiably. “Two for the price of one. Enjoy your visit to the City!”

The train we boarded was a very large fast train that purred gently as we entered. The doors opened automatically as it sensed our approach and a small platform extended out and down to assist our entry. An illuminated floor-plan greeted us to show us which seats were currently unoccupied, with a little sign that read: ‘To reserve your seat, please leave something behind so the seat can sense your continued presence’.

We sat facing each other on two very comfortable seats and gazed at the hubbub of activity on the platform as trolley-loads of mail were loaded onto the train by busy little robots assisted by porters who were dashing up and down with hand-held computers. The train’s engine abruptly changed its note and an announcement, first in English and then in several other languages, informed us that the train was now about to leave. There then emitted a warning siren, a thud as doors were secured and the train eased out of the station with barely any more noise than when it was stationery.

We couldn’t see more than the lights from office-windows and lamp-posts as the train sped on, but we could sense that it was getting progressively faster. The landmarks we passed - small railway stations, automatic signal boxes, overhead cables, weather indicators - sped by in progressively less time. It was too dark to enjoy very much scenery, so we chatted together.

It was less than an hour later when the train drew into the City. It smoothly decelerated from its earlier rapidity and we were at last able to distinguish the lights that sped by.

It was just before midnight and we had arrived in the City with nowhere to

stay. This prospect would normally have terrified me, but I was comforted by no longer being alone. We disembarked and travelled along a series of walkways and escalators past other trains until we came to a series of waiting rooms, shops, restaurants, newsagents, cinemas and cafés. Everything was lit by bright unforgiving neon reflected on smooth tiled floors.

“What do we do now?” Beta asked.

The City wasn’t at all a friendly place to be this late at night. All sorts of sinister looking figures were lurking around the shadows of the station. Pigeons looked down at us from above, seeming to laugh at innocents like us arriving so unprepared. Everyone else seemed to know exactly where they were going. No one else seemed to be in our dilemma.

“I don’t know,” I admitted unhappily. “Find somewhere to sleep, I suppose.”

We were too tired and disorientated to know where to go. We walked aimlessly around the City station following misleading signs. After several minutes of fruitless wandering, we resigned ourselves to spending the night in a waiting room, only to find that others had made the same choice.

We drifted in to lie on the padded plastic seats that seemed so welcoming at this late hour. There was a bull slumped against a column; an eagle on the floor under a chair clasping a can of beer in his wing; a python slumped unsteadily over several steel-framed chairs; and a struthiomimus slumbering on another set of seats, head drooped over his chest. It was not going to be a pleasant night’s sleep, particularly as the bright neon glare from the ceiling showed no evidence of being dimmed during the night, and knowing that not all passengers would necessarily view the waiting room as a place to sleep. I chose a padded seat relatively close to the door, whilst another seat

just opposite was chosen by Beta.

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Morning was heralded by a cacophony of platform announcements, the flutter of circling pigeons and the hiss of the python chatting to the struthiomimus. I looked across the tiled floor at Beta lying spread across her seat, head resting on her arm and eyes that were wide open and staring at me.

“I thought you were *never* going to wake up!” she said with a mocking smile. She swung her body round, ran her fingers through the long tangles of her green hair and rested her feet on the floor. “It’s getting ever so much busier now!”

Although in the tedious hours of the night, I had longed for morning to arrive while listening to Beta’s gentle breathing and the distant sound of unidentifiable machines, the seat now had never seemed more comfortable nor the prospect of continued sleep more welcoming. Nevertheless I prised open my eyes and tried to focus more clearly in the bright neon light that had never dimmed at all, although there was enough natural light streaming through the windows for it to be superfluous.

“What do we do now?”

“Let’s see more of the City!” announced Beta jumping up and frowning at my recumbent figure.

My tongue tasted the sour rawness of my mouth and my fingers carefully detached small grains from the corner of my eyes, while just behind my forehead a persistent thud was commanding me back to sleep. However, I knew there was no prospect of that, regarding the commuters sitting around with their business suits and rolled umbrellas. I followed Beta as she pushed open the glass door to the waiting

room and confronted a greater density of people running backwards and forwards than I had ever seen before. I was pressed against the wall by this whirl of activity, anxious of losing sight of Beta who strode fearlessly ahead.

The jostling flow of commuters, - many no doubt coming from the Suburbs, - marched forward in determined haste towards the signposted underground stations and bus stops. Watches were glanced at, newspapers tucked under arms, tickets stuffed back into wallets and eyes set dead ahead with contempt for all distraction. Beta preceded me through the tall portals of the railway station, past newspaper vendors yelling in staggered unison “Latest Election News!” and “Election Latest!” I dashed after her and caught up with her outside where she stood unabashed and unembarrassed staring around her.

The City was all that I’d imagined it being and more. All around and towering high above were the tallest buildings I could imagine. A narrow corridor of blue sky ran parallel to the road below. People bustled by in two streams of motion on the wide pavements, separated by a slow, nearly stationary, procession of buses, taxis, lorries and cars. Above and passing between and through the tall buildings were monorail tracks from which trains were hanging and standing commuters stared at the pavements below. At street level, shop windows were displaying clothes, electrical goods, robotics, leisure facilities, foreign holidays, luxury lets and anything else that someone with substantially more money than I could afford. Dotting the pavement were advertising boards, bus-stops, litter bins and traffic lights.

“I just can’t believe it! I just can’t believe it!” uttered Beta again and again as she surveyed the scenery. “And this is just a tiny corner of the City! How can there be so much? So many! So ... oops!” A pair of diatrymas jostled past her and caused her to

fall forward slightly. I caught her by the arm before she was trampled underfoot.

“Let’s get out of here,” I suggested.

“Where to?”

“Anywhere. Somewhere not by the station. It’s bound to be busy here.” I looked at a signpost illuminated by a stick figure with a purposeful stride. “How about Her Maphrodite’s Royal Palace?”

Beta agreed. We followed a stream of commuters, at the same rapid pace, dodging the feet of the odd beggar or other figure sprawled out in front of the shops, and constantly in danger of being knocked down and under the crowd ourselves. All we could see, smell or hear were the backs of commuters ahead of us and the fumes and noise of the impatient traffic.

Eventually, the push of the crowd lessened and we were in a much quieter area adorned by older but no less splendid buildings. The enormous skyscrapers and attendant monorails were supplanted by palaces and town houses circumscribed by high walls, towering railings and tall trees.

“Let’s stop!” commanded Beta breathlessly, pausing by an elm tree and a pair of peacocks chatting to a couple of anacondas. She gazed through the railings of a majestic building guarded by soldiers in blue uniforms and bearskin hats, who were marching with eccentrically held rifles. As they approached each other from opposing directions they performed a pantomime with their rifles, spun around and marched back in the direction from which they had come.

Most of the people in this district were carrying cameras and wearing tee-shirts emblazoned with such words as **I © The City**. The building that was the object of their attention and the focus of their cameras was an architectural montage of styles

from every period imaginable. Corinthian arches, Palladian pillars, round domes and grandiose glass windows framed by magnificent velvet curtains. All of this was beyond high golden railings, forbidding guards, several furlongs of concrete and ornate lawn, and a towering row of flag staffs with the blue, red and green standards of several nations waving slightly in the breeze.

“Doesn’t this make you feel proud to belong to this country?” commented one of the pair of peacocks standing by us, a videocamera strapped around his neck. “Don’t you just feel awed by it all?”

“It’s very impressive!” admitted Beta. “Do you think Her Maphrodite might be in residence?”

“On the day of a General Election? Of course!” enthused the peacock. “Someone’s got to be on hand to give the new Prime Minister constitutional authority. Where would we be without Her Maphrodite? It just makes my feathers preen!” He splayed out his orange-eyed feathers. “I just feel sorry for foreigners. They are *so* deprived. They don’t have a monarch to look up to as we do. No wonder they envy us so much and clamour to immigrate in such vast numbers!”

“Is it possible to approach any closer?” wondered Beta, grasping the railings in her hands.

“For the likes of us, of course not! Royalty *have* to stay apart from the mass of ordinary people. It wouldn’t do to mix their blue blood with the debased genes of commoners! They’re over there. And we’re over here. And that’s the way it has to be!”

“I see,” contemplated Beta. “Are they really so much better than us?”

“Someone has to be. And royalty have more entitlement than anyone else!”

The peacocks returned to their serpentine companions who were wrapping themselves around an ash tree and lifting themselves as high as they could to get a better view of the palace grounds and the stiffly marching soldiers. Beta and I stood against the cold iron bars with the crush of tourists behind us and the broad empty space ahead, in which the soldiers performed their unchanging rituals and the flags gently fluttered.

We left the palace and the tourists who, even this early in the morning, were amassing in increasing numbers to glimpse at this world of privilege. We drifted into a precinct of magnificent shops where people in fur coats, jewellery, pearls and gold watches strolled by in total indifference to the majority of the population who were admiring goods they could never afford through massively thick plate glass windows. I certainly couldn't afford the ten thousand guinea suits, the ten million guinea watches, the five hundred guinea silk ties, the four hundred guinea packages of caviar, chocolates or game fowl, the cars in excess of two million guineas and quite modest portraits at several hundreds of millions of guineas. These numbers, with their long string of zeroes, were shocking to me, but even more so to Beta.

"Even the newspapers cost more than five guineas!" she exclaimed. "In the Village, a newspaper costs less than a groat! How can people afford them?"

"I imagine they must earn more money in the City," I remarked, but still awed at the cost of a bar of chocolate at three guineas, a packet of cigarettes at thirty guineas and cassettes at nearly two hundred guineas.

"How much do you have to earn to be able to afford what some of these people have!" Beta exclaimed, indicating some rather fat men in opulent and ostentatious clothes. One man was smoking from a cigar nearly as long as his forearm

and disdainfully flicked ash over a boa constrictor sitting by a cardboard sign which read in scrawling biro: Cold & Hungry! Please Help! The snake squirmed to avoid the ash. "Did you see how much one of those fur coats cost? It would feed the Village for hundreds of years! Where does all this wealth come from?"

The answer to Beta's question was perhaps provided after we had walked beyond the expensive shops; the hotels guarded by smart looking security guards in anachronistic uniforms; the Rolls-Royces, Bentleys and golden carriages parked outside lavish buildings; and the women sporting luxurious fur coats and snakeskin handbags. Tall buildings reappeared, but taller than ever: marble, concrete and glass towering higher and higher. At the top, eagles and condors circled on the up-draughts from the slow-moving traffic below. The buildings had large plaques outside, often set in small grass plots adorned by statues of both modern and antique origin. The names gave me no doubt that this was where in the City there was most wealth: the Country and City First Agricultural Bank, the National & Provincial Assurance Society and the Bank of the New Canine Republics. Each building housed a bank, an insurance company, an investment group or other financial institution. Although only the reflection of other buildings could be seen through the glass windows, I imagined rows upon rows of clerks and computer screens, frantically ringing telephones and stock brokers frenziedly shouting at each other as trillions of guineas were exchanged across international time zones and between other financial centres. Beta was very impressed by my suppositions.

"I've just never thought about money like that before!" she remarked, gawking up at the anonymous windows on the highest windows. "Are you saying that these buildings contain trillions of guineas of money? That must take up an awful amount of

space unless they're stored in very large denominations. Perhaps they have billion guinea notes. That would be an awful lot of **0s**! Would that be nine? Or twelve?"

"I don't think it's actually stored as money," I explained further. "It's nominal rather than actual money. I think it's really just stored as data on computers. The trading is in the form of digits shifting up and down as credit is moved from one account to another."

"What's the point of that? Why can't they just leave it where it is?"

"It's to make profit. If the money moves about a lot it somehow becomes more on the way. I don't know how that works. I think the money is invested into businesses and so on..."

"So, when my father borrowed ten shillings from the bank to buy a new donkey, and paid back a shilling a month for a year that makes the bank profit. I can see that. So they must loan out an awful amount of money. It's a wonder they have any left!"

"I don't think that's the only way that money accrues profit though," I remarked watching a couple of magpies in business suits trot up the steps into the Two Brothers Insurance Company building. "I think that some of it is made from buying things at one price and selling them again at another price. There's a lot of profit to be made if the volumes of the sale are particularly huge. If you buy a billion guineas of pig iron and sell it at a profit of 0.1 % you make a profit of a million guineas. Whereas if you bought only ten guineas of pig iron and sold it at the same profit then you'd only make 2¼d. Hardly worth the effort!"

"Do you mean they've got a billion guineas worth of pig iron in these buildings? No wonder they're so big! I can't begin to imagine how heavy all that

would be.”

“It’s not that they’ve actually got all the pig iron they buy. It’s just a transaction done by computer. The people who trade in pig iron probably never see any at all. They also trade in the anticipated values of things in the future, promises to pay by governments that no longer exist, the likelihood of things happening or not happening, the relative differences between the value of money in one part of the world and another, or anything that will part people from money.”

“That sounds like nonsense to me!” sniffed Beta. “You say that all this wealth is made from things that may or may not exist now or in the future, which you probably wouldn’t really want anyway, and is only stored as electrical or magnetic impulses on enormous computers. What’s that got to do with the real world? How does all that give you food to eat or clothes to wear?” She gazed at the shadows of the buildings on each other, and the walkways hundreds of yards above where more besuited people were walking above our heads. “Then why do they need such enormous buildings?”

We strolled on through the streets, which were extremely busy, even now long after most people had arrived at work, with employees rushing in and out of tall buildings clutching files, brochures and documents under their arms or between their teeth. There were bowler hats, striped shirts, braces, dress-suits and stilettos jostling past us on all species of worker, all entirely intent on their destination. The eyes were always fixed ahead and regarded us only as obstacles to be sidestepped.

“How many banks are there?” Beta wondered as we paused to let two vultures dash by in urgent conversation, tiny bowler hats covering their bald heads and umbrellas tucked under their wings.

“Not that many really!” remarked a tall pigeon about our size who was standing nearby and pecking at a bag of seeds he supported in a wing. “I’m sorry to interrupt your conversation, but I just couldn’t help overhearing you. All this ridiculous wealth: trillions and zillions of it in less than a cubic mile of the City. It’s enough to make you spit! What do they want so much of it for? And what is it for but to build even more of these enormous buildings, push up the land rental to extremes you just can’t comprehend, and push out all the honest hard-working Citizens like me who will never ever see the smallest iota of this wealth. And where are we to go? The East End slums? The distant Suburbs? Have you *any* idea how expensive rent is in the City?”

“None at all,” I admitted, as we huddled against the Commercial & Lambdeth Union & Friendly Society to avoid being stampeded under a rush of shirt-sleeved young men led by a couple of hinnying hyenas in psychedelic braces. “More than in the Suburbs I imagine.”

“You’ll be lucky to get much more than a room the size of a toilet cubicle for less than five thousand guineas a week. That’s a week! And how many people living in the City earn the sort of money they can afford that kind of expense? I consider myself fortunate to take home just enough to get by. There are plenty whose earnings are less than six digits.”

“That’s still an awful lot!” gasped Beta.

The pigeon glanced at Beta. “You would say that! I guess you must come from the Country. You have coins smaller than a crown there I believe. And you can even buy things with them! But to many working in this financial district, like those noisy louts who just passed by, anything less than nine digits is considered an admission of

failure. For them it's just money, money, money. And what do they spend it on? Champagne. Gambling. Fast cars. What do you think of that?"

"I suppose if I had a lot of money like that there would be quite a few frivolous things I'd like to buy," mused Beta. "It'd be quite nice to have more money than I need."

"It certainly would be!" chirped the pigeon enviously. "I would just love to know that my salary cheque would see me through the month comfortably, with no risk of my bank balance going into the red! But what makes it *so* unfair - so terribly and utterly unfair - is that all that money which piles up as a result of all this financial wizardry and wheeling and dealing eventually goes to shareholders who haven't contributed anything to this activity but capital. Capital, moreover, that they have mostly just inherited. Only those who already have obscene quantities of wealth can invest money and make money."

"Is that how it works?" Beta wondered. "Rich people put in a lot of money and then get a lot more out."

"Essentially, yes. And there's a kind of sliding scale. The more you already have the more you're going to make."

"So ..." Beta reflected, "the rich get richer and richer. What about people who're not rich? Don't they get richer too?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think so for one minute! These financial institutions aren't working in the interests of the poor. Why should they?"

"If there's only so much wealth in the world and more of it is going to richer people, then there must be a drain from somewhere else," I remarked.

"Only if there's only a fixed amount of wealth in the world," the pigeon replied.

“All this prosperity is based on the belief that the world’s wealth will just go on growing for ever and ever. And because of that, people say that it isn’t just the rich who benefit. Everyone else does as well.”

“That sounds silly!” Beta pointed out. “How can things just keep growing forever? Surely there must be a point at which it just can’t grow any more. And then what happens? Do the rich continue to get richer and everyone else gets poorer to finance them? Do the things which used to make money stop making so much money in future? And can’t it all go into reverse? Maybe all these buildings will just crumble into the ground and we’ve used up all the world’s resources?”

“I don’t know. I’m not an economist. I just live here.”

The streets of the financial district eventually gave way to an area of shops, restaurants and cafés at the foot of buildings that still towered above us, but seemed less remote and threatening. The hustle and bustle eased, but there was still the ubiquitous roar of traffic. By now, like everyone else, we were no longer really seeing the people we passed by. Their very numbers had somehow robbed them of personality.

Even though it was still some time till midday, diners were greedily eating in the restaurants and cafés. We peered through the window of a restaurant to see two pigs facing each other over a table loaded with plates of the most exotic and rare foods which they shovelled into their mouths with a constant unbroken rhythm. A waiter approached and poured them each a glass of wine which they picked up in their trotters and drank immediately in one mouthful, so requiring a further refill. One of the pigs noticed us and made no attempt to avert his gaze. His jaws clumped again and again on a sinuous trail of meat which dangled out of his mouth while rich sauces

dribbled down the dark pink folds of his chin and mixed in the kaleidoscope of stains on the cloth table napkin tucked into the collar of his striped shirt.

“There’s enough food there to feed my Village for a month!” gasped Beta. “How can they eat so much? There must be much much more food than they could possibly need!”

The pig lost interest in us and returned to his food with relish, plunging his knife and fork deep into its entrails. His companion had not once paused his gorging, but the likelihood of him finishing before his companion was lessened by the waiter bringing in more plates of food. Looking at so much food awakened Beta’s appetite, so we wandered past restaurants selling meals at thousands of guineas a head until we found a small, comparatively inexpensive café where a cup of coffee cost less than ten guineas. The décor of the café matched the relative cost of the coffee, with only a few very uncomfortable wooden stools lined along a small counter facing onto the street outside. I paid for two coffees with several grimy pound notes which the anaconda serving was initially reluctant to accept, while Beta reserved two seats for us just next to a pair of teenage boys and a couple of small minotaurs. I lifted myself up onto the stool and looked through the plate glass window, past writing in Cyrillic and Arabic, to the never-ceasing crush of pedestrians outside. It was somehow relaxing to watch this world go by, knowing that, temporarily at least, we were not a part of it. The coffee however didn’t taste at all pleasant and was not especially warm. The addition of tasteless milk from the sachet or sugar cubes in paper covers did nothing to improve the taste nor the temperature.

“What do you think of the City?” I asked, putting down the cup and trying to ignore its taste. “Is it all that you expected?”

“There *does* seem to be an awful lot of it!” she remarked. “Much more than I thought. Anna was right. The City does make Lambdeth seem terribly provincial. And I thought that was big enough. Everyone seems to be terribly busy. Dashing around with some mysterious purpose.”

“Not everybody!” I commented, pointing at a pair of ground sloths who were slumped over a table, idly peering at tabloid newspapers with the headlines **Reds Do Better than Expected** and **Her Maphrodite’s Aunt Eats Hamsters**. Beta turned her head round, a curtain of hair flopping down to her knees.

“Those two don’t look busy either,” she said indicating a couple of crocodiles who were sitting impassively, barely even blinking, with full but probably cold cups of tea on the table in front of them. It was difficult to believe that they were in fact real living people, but it seemed implausible that anyone would bring in two stuffed models and set them there. “I suppose not everyone in the City has a lot to do.”

“If you were unemployed then neither would you have!” sharply remarked one of the boys sitting next to us, who like Beta wore no clothes.

“You mean they might not have jobs?” Beta remarked.

“Not everyone has, you know!” the boy continued. “You come from the Country don’t you?”

Beta nodded.

“My brother and I did as well. We thought: come to the City and get rich. Even the unemployment benefit is several hundred times more than you could ever earn in the Country. But it doesn’t last. Money just doesn’t go anywhere here. And if you haven’t got a job, what can you do? Just sit in cafés like this and watch life go by and just wish you had a chance to join in.”

“Surely there are plenty of jobs here,” I commented. “If that wasn’t so, why do so many people from the Suburbs commute here to work?”

“There are jobs for *them*!” the other boy remarked. “That’s why the City wants them. But farm labourers like us, what can we do that we’re qualified for? There are only so many jobs available for our like. And so many people crowd here from all over that the jobs soon go. And then all you do and all you’ve got energy to do is spend your time surviving. And in between the visits to the dole office and going to bed, what else can you do? Just watch things go by.”

“I really envy those crocodiles,” the first boy continued. “They can take the boredom. I don’t know how they do it! Hours these reptiles can spend doing absolutely nothing. I suppose it’s just their make up.”

“But surely even without money there are things to do?” Beta wondered. “My father’s always saying he wished he had more time not looking after the farm animals and tending the crops. All the books you can read. All the things you can see. All the creative things you can do.”

“It’s not like that!” sniffed the boy. “You just don’t understand. That’s what you think at first. But one day becomes another and time goes by. No job. No money. And it becomes a trap you get into. Soon you just get resigned to it.”

“I just can’t believe you can’t do anything. It must be very boring!”

“It is! It is!” the boy agreed.

“It’s inevitable though,” his companion said. “If everyone was busy then for those who can afford to do things there’d just be no space to do them. The City needs people to do nothing or it would just have no space left. It’s people staying at home, out of sight and out of mind that keep this place functioning. If everyone was active,

going to cafés, writing novels and so on, everything would just seize up”

We finished our coffees and strayed again into the street which had become no less busy for our absence. As we walked past more restaurants and shops, my feet were getting very weary and Beta’s feet had become almost black with the dust and grime from the pavements. Occasionally, we had to stop for her to detach a small patch of darkened chewing gum or mushed cigarette end from her soles. It was on one such occasion, while Beta was trying to shake a disgusting plastic stretch of gum from her fingers, that we heard a loud commotion. Beta looked up sharply to see a pair of wolves who were baying at a couple of bulls in track-suits.

The abuse was quite explicit and extremely personal. As the accusations were so bizarre and disgusting they must have been grounded on speculation rather than firm evidence. One of the bulls retorted with an angry snort by butting a wolf with his head. This triggered a sudden and startling flurry of violent action which at once froze the flow of pedestrian traffic in its track. The wolves leapt onto the bulls, teeth and claws at the ready, while the bulls circled round and around with menacing impulsive thrusts of their long horns and their tails slashing out like whips at the wolves on their backs.

Most pedestrians either turned back or crossed the road to avoid the violence. Some braver ones gingerly passed by along the kerbside. More disturbingly however, several pedestrians decided to participate. A pair of weasels wearing jeans and tee-shirts produced flick-knives and jumped on top of the bulls. A thickset boa constrictor sprang onto one of the bulls and pulled its body around the bull’s neck. The violence was beginning to draw blood. One of the bull’s horns was reddened at the tip and a wolf was viciously thrown against a restaurant window which withstood the impact

but caused him to slide unconscious onto the pavement.

“This is horrible!” exclaimed Beta, showing more presence of mind than me. “Let’s go!” She pulled me away and we headed down a busy street perpendicular to the one we’d been on. As we hastened along, a large sparrow chirped at us with something of a chuckle in his voice: “Quite a scrap, eh!”

“I’m sorry? What did you say?” I asked.

“That fight! Lots of blood, eh! Not the most violent I’ve seen but pretty good anyway!”

“Good!” retorted Beta, clearly distressed. “What could be good about that?”

“Well not good, so much. But pretty violent. Not the worst, but bad enough. I’ve seen a lot of violence in the City. You do, you know! You just do. You can’t avoid it. It’s everywhere. The City is a violent place!”

“Is it?” Beta asked, looking at the mass of people passing by.

“Look at that police officer!” The sparrow continued, pointing with a wing at a savage looking ceratosaurus in a uniform nestling a small automatic rifle in his arms. “Don’t tell me that he carries that around with him if he doesn’t think he needs it, eh? This is a violent place. Rapes, ultraviolence, gang bangs, mass shoot-outs, everything. Often the pavements are just red with blood after an especially gruesome gangland killing. Business leaders get shot point-blank through the head, their brains splattered over spaghetti and lasagne. Pubs get blown apart with small incendiary devices. Cars get stolen and plough down innocent pedestrians on the pavement. Arguments are settled in a blaze of gunfire. Buildings are set alight and their inhabitants tied to chairs to prevent them escaping. People are chosen at random, followed by assassins and their entrails torn out of them. The City can be pretty violent, eh!”

“I’m sure it can be,” remarked Beta, with an expression of some distress. “We must be on our way though.”

“Well be careful as you go, eh!” the sparrow remarked as Beta hastened us along the shop-lined street at quite a stride.

“I hope we don’t see very much of this violence,” I commented kindly. “It’s not very pleasant.”

Beta flashed a quite angry glance at me. “I don’t want to talk. Or even think about it,” she enunciated slowly and firmly. I scampered along behind her, belatedly aware of the distress she’d felt on witnessing the fight.

The road we walked along was brightly lit by neon, despite it being early morning, and we passed cinemas, shops and other places of quite a different character than those we’d passed before. **GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS!** one screamed out in orange neon with a window covered with pictures of naked women of all species engaged in some very peculiar behaviour. **Naked Encounter** promised another. **Topless and Uninhibited** a bar advertised.

“I don’t like this area at all!” remarked Beta, slowing her rapid pace and walking closer to me as if for protection.

Scantly dressed women, but none of them dressed as naturally as Beta, gazed at us surlily from shop doorways, and through red-lit windows, which, if they were shops, were either selling decor for those with a distinct preference for the colour red and a preponderance of satin and silk, or (more likely) the services of the semi-clad women who pouted at us as we passed by.

“I’ve never heard of any of those films,” I remarked pointing at the neon titles of a cinema. *I’m Coming On You. Sexy Serpents. Two Is Not*

Enough. Twelve Hours Of Passion.

They don't look very nice, do they?" remarked Beta stopping in front of the cinema and looking at the explicit pictures of innumerable different sexual practices between various species who exhibited more than a hint of pleasure in their faces. "Look at that! How can *anyone* do *that*? Do people actually come here to watch films of that sort of thing?"

I looked around me. There were still quite a few people in the street, but actually rather less than in most of the City. There was also less traffic, but the vehicles were still driving by rather slowly. People of all species, but mostly male, were entering and leaving shops through plastic strips that only partially obscured the rows and rows of videos, magazines and other objects displaying a preponderance of naked flesh and sexual organs. The words Sex, Flesh, Hard Core and the letters **XXXX** seemed to adorn almost every building that wasn't a residential block.

"I don't like this at all!" Beta asserted, though seeming strangely excited at the same time. "Let's leave here as soon as we can!"

She strode on, and I followed as close behind her as I could, ignoring as best I could the curious calls from the more human women who stood in shop doorways in little more than their underwear. My ears burnt with embarrassment while the pressure against the inside of my trousers was somehow reappraising my feelings towards Beta in a way that I couldn't claim to be proud of.

Beta steered us off the main roads down some quite narrow roads, framed on either side by the windowless hulk of tall buildings, but it was not long until we felt lost and longed to return to the relative comfort of a more populated street. The few people we passed seemed somehow menacing and unwelcome, however innocuous

they might otherwise appear. We zigzagged across the roads to avoid them, huddling together for protection. It was very dark in the shadows of the buildings on all sides, and despite being nearly midday on a sunny day it seemed more like twilight.

Our nerves, already on edge in this unfamiliar and threatening locality, were further troubled by what appeared to be the sudden and shrieking scream of a large bird.

“What was that?” gasped Beta.

“I don’t know. Whatever it is, I don’t want to find out! Let’s go!”

The scream came out again, and this time it sounded much more like someone shouting in distress.

“I don’t think that’s the right thing to do at all!” reproved Beta sternly. “If someone’s in trouble we ought to try and help.”

She strode off in the direction of the scream and, abashed but still reluctantly, I chased after her.

We followed the punctuated cries around a series of anonymous buildings and narrow streets as they became gradually more distinct. “Get off! Ow! Leave me alone!” The calls were soon identifiable as coming from a woman.

Beta broke into a run and I picked up my pace to stay within sight of her. We turned a corner past black plastic rubbish bags and decrepit cardboard boxes, and were confronted by the sight of a young woman struggling in the grip of a large pig wearing a uniform and a conical hat.

“Leave her alone!” commanded Beta with authority.

The pig turned round, holding the woman’s arm in one of his trotters, revealing that he was a police officer. He contemplated us standing there.

“Just leave her be! She doesn’t like being held like that!”

I couldn’t help marvelling at Beta’s steadfastness of purpose in confronting someone who if he so chose could probably make our lives very unpleasant. The police officer was also rather impressed, and simply released his grip so that the woman slumped sloppily onto the pavement. She was sobbing and weeping forlornly. I noticed for the first time that she was quite severely pregnant: a large round belly whose distended navel swelled out from beneath her stretched tee-shirt and hung over her ragged knee-length skirt.

“The City has a policy of discouraging vagrancy,” the police officer said in his defence.

“I’m sure the girl is quite discouraged now!” Beta replied, bravely conciliatorily. “If you leave her with us, we’ll ensure she’s looked after.”

“Very well!” remarked the police officer, clearly quite embarrassed as he fastened his belt together round his rotund waist. He looked down at the pregnant girl who was huddled in a piteous state, her shoulder-length hair over her face and her hands supported on her bare knees. “Don’t let me find you begging again,” he ordered her unconvincingly, “or the full weight of the law will descend on you!”

He then pocketed his truncheon, turned around and strode off down the narrow streets, leaving us behind.

Beta raced over to the girl, bent down to her and drew her sobbing face to her bare breasts. I stood helplessly by, feeling somewhat redundant and removed from the drama.

The girl raised her thin, high cheekboned face and stared at us through tears and their silver reflection on her cheeks. “Thank you! Thank you!” she repeated

between sobs.

She was in a very sorry state, and not just as a result of her recent assault. Her hair was matted and unwashed; her clothes were smudged and torn; her feet were bare and black with the muck of the pavement; and her skin was discoloured by a mixture of dirt and bruises. Her face was the very image of suffering. “He was horrid! Horrid!”

Beta looked up at me with a sad smile.

“We’d better get her out of here.”

She turned back to the girl.

“What’s your name? Where do you come from?”

“Una. My name’s Una,” the girl sobbed. “I don’t come from anywhere. At least not lately. I used to live in Unity. Beyond the Country. But I don’t live anywhere now. Thank you! Thank you! That horrid pig! Just because I’m so poor. I’ve not lost my humanity, even if I have lost my dignity. It was horrible! Horrible!”

Wordlessly, Beta lifted Una to her feet and gestured to me to help carry her. She was not too badly harmed by the encounter, although some of the bruises on her arm were quite fresh and tender, and she hugged her bare stomach with anxiety. She was very light, despite the extra weight she carried inside her, and would normally be very thin. Her wrists were nearly half the thickness of Beta’s and her legs were of almost childlike proportions. She was also slightly shorter than Beta. Her hair was very pale despite the patches of dirt that darkened it.

As we supported her and walked slowly along the back streets in the hope of finding somewhere to rest she continued sobbing: ruing her luck and reflecting on her recent assault.

“It’s because I look such a rag doll! It’s because I’m so filthy! Even the police

think I'm fair game! Just a victim to be victimised again and again!"

"I'm sure that's not true, Una," remarked Beta comfortingly. "Nobody's meant to be a victim. No one has to be abused."

"Yes they do. Yes they are. And I'm one," Una sobbed with understandable self-pity. "And here I am with the child of a rapist in my womb wandering the desolate City streets; sleeping in dark alley-ways under newspapers and cardboard; drinking soup at soup kitchens and eating the rubbish left in waste-paper bins. I'm just as low as you can get! Any lower and I'd be dead!"

"Don't be silly," Beta said reassuringly but without conviction. "There's always worse than the worst you'll ever know."

We emerged into the relative brightness of an open street in which there were the comforting arcades of shops and the hustle and bustle of people. The streets here were nonetheless quieter than most we'd seen up to now and the shops were correspondingly more mundane, but still more spectacular than any that would be seen in Suburban shopping centres.

"There's an empty bench," I said indicating one facing across the road at the stream of traffic roaring by. "Let's sit down."

"Good idea," agreed Beta.

We sat on a hard plastic bench between a waste-paper bin and a signpost, much defaced by pen-knives and decorated with arcane graffiti. *Jim* ©*Julie* read the graffiti between my knees. We set Una between us, but she leaned heavily on Beta's shoulder and stroked her arm idly while talking not so much to us, or to anyone, but for the sake of talking.

"I've lost all my pride. You do, you know, when you're at the bottom of the

heap. I've done almost anything to survive. Begged, borrowed and even stolen. You have to. You've got to eat. You just want food or something to drink all the time. It fills your thoughts. I never thought eating would be so important before, but now that and sleep are the two most significant things in my life. If it's not where to get food, it's where to lay my head at night. You can't believe! I envy the wealth of all the people who pass by as I sit begging on the street with a cup or empty sweet box. I just see them as sources of income. I hate them when they don't put even the smallest guinea or crown in my box. Why can't they help more? I say. And when they give me money I'm grateful, sure, but I think why don't they give me more? What can a guinea buy you in the City? What can even a hundred guineas buy you?"

"Not very much by the look of it," I remarked, looking at the prices of three or four guineas marked on discarded sweet papers on the ground beneath my feet.

"The money I get in a day's begging in the City would be plenty in Unity, but then it's all gone. A cup of coffee in a café, if they'll even let me in, a few rolls, perhaps some clothes. When there's only food and sleep to look forward to, you particularly cherish sleep. It's cheap and readily available, even if it's taken me a long time to get used to sleeping rough. At first I couldn't sleep at all. I ached all day long from the pressure of the pavement beneath me. And I'm so vulnerable too. A lone girl with no friends in the midst of an enormous unfamiliar city. Men always try to take advantage of me. Despite me being pregnant! But I'm a nice girl. I'm not like that! But that's just not sufficient for them all, as you saw with that *disgusting* pig! God! I hate him! Why me? Why do even law enforcers think that I can be treated with such brutal disrespect? I hate him! I hate the City! I hate everything and everyone!"

She paused and then suddenly burst into a flood of tears. Beta put her arm

around her, and then looked up at me.

“Isn’t there somewhere better than here to sit? It’s not very comfortable or private.”

I looked up at the signpost. The image of a striding man marching in the direction of the **City Park** looked quite promising. I mentioned this to Beta.

“Parks are very relaxing places in the Suburbs. It’s much better than sitting here with all these people jostling by.”

Beta readily agreed, so we persuaded Una to stand up and we walked slowly along the street in the direction indicated by the signpost. As we proceeded, we passed more shops and a few department stores, but what I thought particularly odd was the number of large television screens lining the exterior of the buildings. They all featured different stations, but all showed similar images of suited people talking to other individuals down padded microphones. I pointed this out to Beta.

“Is television all you can think of?” Beta upbraided me harshly, but she raised her head and looked up at the images. “Oh! It’s the Election results!”

“The Election?” I remarked. I’d totally forgotten the big event of the day. “Is it now?”

“Well, it’s already taken place you know. I didn’t vote of course - I wasn’t registered in Lambdeth - but I’d have voted Green. Did you vote?”

“No. I wasn’t anywhere near the Suburbs. Who do you think has won?”

“Well, let’s find out. You don’t mind, do you Una, if we watch the Election Results?”

“No, of course not. Of course not. Though it won’t make any difference to me who’s elected. All those different parties. They’re all the same, aren’t they?”

Beta looked as if she would like to disagree, but she restrained the urge and instead stood by a tree with Una leaning heavily on her shoulder and me standing beside her. Many pedestrians also stopped in their tracks and gazed at the television screens, where on all of them different newscasters of different species in similar attire faced the camera with faces admixed with the excitement and solemnity of the event. The television screen we were nearest showed two characters, one a cobra with glasses and the other human.

“We are now authorised to announce the results of the General Election,” the cobra spoke slowly and reverently. Behind him was an inset picture of several flags of different colours and the images of significant politicians, one of whom I recognised as President Chairman Rupert.

“They said they’d give the results at midday,” whispered Beta excitedly.

“It’s been an exciting and hectic Election,” the newscaster continued. “The most important there has probably ever been. An Election which has seen opinion polls swing widely from side to side, up and down, and topsy-turvy. An Election which has seen the active campaigns of the Red Party and the Blue Party overshadowed by the controversies surrounding the Illicit Party and, more usually for General Elections, the Black Party. An Election which has seen the White Party cornered again and again for a firm statement of policy and ideology, and has marked the increasing significance of the Green Party.” Beta slightly squeezed my arm at that brief mention. “However, it is official. The results have come in and we are able to announce them. So, Gilbert, what are they?”

The other newscaster raised his head from the piece of paper he had in front of him. “Thank you, George. Yes the results are in. Results which signify the final disu

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nification of the Coition Government. The full details will be given later as it is complicated to explain the method of calculation in the Single Transferable Vote system. The main outcome is as follows. In the first round the Blue Party gained 30% of the vote and in the previous electoral system would have been the dominant party of the Coition government. The Red Party gained 26%. On vote reallocation, however, the Red Party gained votes predominantly from the second preferences of the Green and Illicit Parties, whilst the Blue Party gained votes chiefly from the Black and White Parties. The final result is that the Red Party has triumphed in the Election with an overall reallocated total of 53% of the vote, against the Blue Party's 47%. I repeat. The Election has been won by the Red Party!"

Other television station announcers had been less circumlocutory in declaring the result, and choruses of cheers and moans broke out all along the main street before we had any idea whose victory had prompted the response. On the whole, it seemed that those who favoured the victory marginally outnumbered those opposed: a figure perhaps reflected by the curious scaled down percentages.

"This has not quite been the decisive victory the Red Party may have hoped for. It is still in a weak position, although it now has a mandate which will enable it to succeed the Coition Government. Our cameras now take you to the Central Polling Office to hear from the Prime Minister designate."

The image on the television screen echoed, in curious uniformity, the same picture as all the others on the main street, where successful candidates stood on a

platform surrounded by computer screens and a crowd of hostile and enthusiastic observers. It was clear that some disruption in the crowd was holding up the proceedings, in which fruit and flour was being thrown onto the platform.

“A Red Party victory!” Beta exclaimed. “Who’d’ve thought! I suppose they’d’ve been my second preference as well. I wonder what difference that will make.”

“None whatsoever!” opined Una sceptically. “Whichever party is in power, whatever government, everything will remain the same!”

“I can’t see how that can be!” Beta countered automatically but, reminded of Una’s plight, decided not to pursue her argument. “However, less of politics. Shall we continue to the Park? I don’t want Una to get caught up in all the revelry!”

Indeed quite a lot of celebration accompanied us as we walked along the street. Those who favoured the result were evidently making the most of their joy, in a chorus of screams, yells, hooting cars, raised clenched fists and a snowfall of ticker-tape and confetti which showered on our heads from the windows of the tall buildings high above. Horses charged by through nearly stationary traffic neighing praise to the Red Party, sometimes carrying flag-waving carousers on their backs. Red flags were waved in triumph. Blue flags, Green flags and Black flags were waved in defiance. We dodged around a particular nasty fight between some velociraptors in black shirts and a pair of horses. An elderly elephant wearing a blue rosette stood transfixed by the side of the road, seemingly unable to comprehend the results. A pair of hedgehogs wearing bobble hats and green wellington boots looked rather embarrassed by the side of a banner optimistically proclaiming the success of the Green Party.

“I don’t think many people in the Suburbs will be pleased with the success of

the Red Party,” I commented to Beta. “Most people there would’ve voted for the White Party or the Blue Party. In fact, I don’t think a single person would ever confess to voting Red. How is it that they managed to win?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it!” replied Una, taking more interest in the Election than her apparent cynicism would suggest. “The Red Party are the party that more than any other claims to represent the interests of the poor, the dispossessed, the hungry, the disenfranchised, the put upon and the discriminated against. Since there are rather more people like that in this country than anyone else, the real mystery is why the other parties have done so well. There aren’t that many people who’d be classified as rich enough for representation by the Blue Party.”

“So you believe that people are voting entirely for self-interest,” Beta said. “The poor vote for the party of the poor. The rich for the party of the rich...”

“The racists for the party of the racists. The apathetic for the party of the apathetic. Of course! People only ever do anything if they see something in it for themselves.”

“But don’t people vote for what they think is best for the country? Don’t they support the causes they believe are going to be best for everyone?”

“Dream on!” sneered Una weakly.

She was still leaning heavily on Beta and clearly found it quite difficult struggling against the maelstrom of political supporters. The crowds thronged the streets up to the very entrance to the City Park, which was graced by two high ornate gates, supported by tall fluted pillars topped by the statue of a rampant horse. We eased our way through the crowd and into the park which after only a few paces seemed many leagues distant from the City surrounding it.

In all directions ahead of us was a garden landscape of unexpected beauty and magnificence. Oaks, sycamores and beeches dotted well-tended lawns bordered by tarmacked paths and signposted at every junction. The shiny reflection of the sun beamed at us from a lake in the distance, whose calm surface was broken only by swans and small boats. Park benches, small statues, decorative flower beds and ornate lamp-posts dotted the park at discreet distances from each other. There was a sprinkling of decorative buildings, including an open bandstand where a brass band was entertaining a gathering of deck-chairs and the odd snoozing music lover. The distantly seen towering heights of the City seemed somewhat unreal and unthreatening. The park was remarkably quiet despite the constant roar of traffic noises and the exultation of voters from outside. For the first time all day I heard the more peaceful songs of birds darting about in tall trees and felt a more calming breeze on my face than that given off by passing traffic.

“Ohh! This is lovely!” exclaimed Beta. “I didn’t imagine there was anything like this in the City. I don’t know why anyone ever goes anywhere else!”

“Not so much to eat here,” replied Una. “Nice to sleep here during the day, but very dangerous at night.”

Beta looked compassionately at the pregnant girl. “We’d better find you somewhere to rest. How about over there under that big oak by that statue?”

Una nodded, so we slowly ambled across the lawn towards the tree, past the bandstand where moustachioed men were playing a mixture of songs old and new to a relaxing psychedelic beat. A couple of horses grazed nearby, their tails swinging in time to the rhythm. As we approached, it became increasingly obvious that what had seemed like a giant statue of a lion was in fact a real lion, if a rather large one.

“I hope he’s not fierce!” remarked Beta. “If he is, he’d eat all three of us in next to no time! Perhaps we ought to find somewhere else to sit.”

“I think it might be someone I’ve met before,” I remarked.

As I suspected it was indeed Lord Arthur. If anything he looked more bedraggled than before, his large muzzle gazing mournfully at the shadow of a park bench with his paw spread out in front. He raised his head and saw the three of us approach. He seemed listless at first. Then he stood up, appearing to recognise me, towering high above us, trailing his apparently lifeless tail behind him. He walked slowly and unsteadily towards us, really not appearing nearly as fierce or imposing as a lion is supposed to be.

“Welcome! Welcome!” he greeted us. “You *are* the young man I met so recently in another city, aren’t you? What are you and your delightful friends doing here in the City Park?”

“We were looking for somewhere to rest Una here,” I explained. “We saved her from being abused and as you can see she’s very heavy with child, so we came to the most restful place we could find.”

“An excellent idea. Most excellent,” the lion agreed. “So relax with me under the shade of this magnificent tree. I insist. I would really appreciate the company. After the events of the last few distressing weeks, which have reduced me to nearly the status of a pauper, I need all the friendly company I can find.”

He heralded us towards the tree where he had been lying, and we sat in its shade by the very distinct imprint Lord Arthur had left on the grass. Beta steadily eased Una down to recline on her back and stare straight up at the sky. The bulge of her belly distended out from the inadequate restraints of her ragged clothes and

glistened in the sunlight. Beta sat next to me, while Lord Arthur eased himself down onto the trampled lawn.

“It’s been a bad day for me!” the lion said sadly. “Another terrible day. Yet another business sold. Yet another last remnant of a financial empire lost. My last stake in the financial district - all thirteen hundred storeys above and below earth lost to a rapacious pair of hippogriffs. They’d already bought my department store, **Arthur’s**, in the plush New City district. My final stake in the City. For hardly enough to pay off a quarter of my creditors. All those trillions of guineas of potential wealth gone forever. I’ll be bankrupt before the week is out, I tell you!”

“Are you having money problems?” asked Beta politely.

“You could say that!” Lord Arthur exclaimed. “It’s been one humiliation after another. And to crown it all ... But perhaps there is hope ... The celebration. The cheering. The Election results I presume!” His ears twitched through the threadbare mass of his mane at the distant sound of klaxons and megaphones. “Tell me. What was the result, my dear?”

“A victory for the Red Party.”

“Damn!” swore the lion. “Damn! Damn! Damn!”

He lowered his head, overcome by the news and closed the enormous lids of his eyes. He exhaled heavily several times as if to contain the strength of his feelings, his enormous back arching with each breath. He then raised his head and looked at Beta apologetically.

“Excuse me for my profane language, my dear. But it really is the worst ... the worst possible ... news! My downfall is secured now. No government led by the Red Party would ever express sympathy for me. The Blue Party: I had hope there. A Blue

Government and I may have been saved. Any other party and there was the faintest glimmering of hope. But no Red Government would see the need, the urgency or even the desirability of bailing out a bankrupt trillionaire who in his time has been the very icon of material success and economic power! I am now no better than your pregnant vagrant friend in the eyes of the government, and I expect I will be treated with exactly the same lack of sympathy. This is indeed a black day for me, and for all those who have accumulated such colossal wealth during the long years of vacillating rule by the corrupt and indecisive Coition Government.”

“How wealthy were you?” Beta asked.

“Incredibly so,” Lord Arthur replied sadly. “I just had no idea how many trillions I boasted. For a while I was the wealthiest person on this planet. Surely you have heard of the power and wealth of Lord Arthur? Richer than the GNP of most countries! More powerful than the Coition Government and able to pull the strings of any government with just the smallest trickle from my colossal coffers. Able to buy politicians, judges and the power of the media. A wealth and power that was not always used, I hope, in pure material gain but never, of course, against my interests. I was the subject of millions of printed words, of thousands of newspaper inches and of hundreds of magazine covers. Princes, magnates and the heads of churches were at my beck and call. No single person had ever been as powerful nor as wealthy before me!”

“How have you come to lose it all?”

“Misfortune. Imprudence. Fate. Stupidity. I don’t know. So many different reasons. So many possible causes. My downfall has attracted nearly as much attention as my rise. I have never been poor. My family was wealthy, and wealth had been in our genes for countless generations. There have been times of fluctuating wealth over the

centuries. First from tin, then wool, but by the time I came into my inheritance on the early death of my father the wealth of our family was mostly in trade and shipping. My genius, if I can be so immodest, was to take advantage of lucrative openings in heavy industry, manufacturing and finance. I was so far ahead of my competitors I could be complacent. My multinationals were big and powerful enough to be free from the taxation and punitive legislation of any one country. I rode slipshod through the world's taxation and every country's laws: often forcing through tax advantages and even constitutional changes when it was profitable to do so.

“Sure, there were those who protested at the growth of my business empire, but usually markets were just begging to be taken over. They would even go out of their way to woo my assistance in the hope that I would support their failing enterprises (often, I hesitate to admit, enterprises which had failed due entirely to my own manipulation of the markets). Whatever the initial reaction - hostility or friendship - the end result was the same. The companies were absorbed into the general Arthurian corporation or left nominally independent but in actual fact nearly as much owned by my corporation as any other. My market share in the City rose and rose, until I was unassailable. My competitors could only look at **Lord Arthur plc** with envy. They knew there was no way they could topple me from my perch.

“Undoubtedly, some tried. A woman of some passion and impressive business acumen first by persuasion and then later by much more aggressive means managed to build quite a powerful company from the ruins of a once powerful food chain. She became an active competitor in the international arena. At one stage it seemed that where my economic advisers were moving in for the kill, so too were hers, and not always unsuccessfully. She managed to muscle in extremely successfully into the spice

and marijuana industries, where I'd never been that successful, and took quite sizeable stakes in heroin, furs and fisheries. Her downfall, and my success, in this trade war, was due to her arrogance. She was never content to simply cream off the profit from her acquisitions. She tried to bring them under rigid control. No company likes to lose its identity. I had always followed the axiom that the main purpose of business is to make money, not to pursue a crusade. Her business empire suffered from employee dissatisfaction and manager buyouts. But then I shouldn't crow too much about my relative success. She isn't doing too badly these days while virtually my entire empire has collapsed about me.

“Being the unchallenged leader of the business world was a very heady affair. I only belatedly became aware of just how much wealth I had. Of course, I'd always been believed that I was innately superior, but the proof of it was something different. True, my progress had been troubled by a local problem in which a section of my slavery and popcorn industry had bought itself out of the main corporate umbrella. I was very ill advised. I had treated this section of my industry in just the same unsubtle way that had marred my main competitor, who'd already had her fingers burnt on the same venture. Other than that, and a bit of disruption from the silk underwear unions who'd demanded parity of pay with coal-miners, I had a fairly untroubled dominance of world business.

“Perhaps my downfall was that it had been *too* easy. I began to believe my own marketing propaganda. I was truly Number One and as Number One likely to remain so. Nobody would ever lose their job through preferring an Arthurian product over a rival. I made sure of that. Whatever I touched turned into gold. This was reflected in my personal life. Despite the quite austere and very proper image I presented to the

world, I indulged in secret in all sorts of vice. Drugs, sex, loud music, gross perversion, ostentation became my life. Probably why I haven't aged quite as well as I ought to have done."

Lord Arthur looked ruefully at the threadbare patches in his tawny fur.

"However, the rule of business is *never* to confuse private vice with public virtue, and I'm afraid this is an axiom I often nearly forgot. It certainly bred an attitude of arrogance and carelessness which led to some very unwise investments. I was acquiring businesses through leveraged buyouts and greenmail which with more forethought I should have left well alone.

"However, I can see in retrospect that my worst vice was really complacency. Having such an overriding dominance over your competitors breeds that. You think you can afford luxuries beyond the reach of prudent economics. My companies became famous as good employers: providing staff with the very best working conditions and pay available. It was considered a privilege to work for an Arthurian concern, and people clamoured to do so.

"Unfortunately, I didn't pay very much attention to the quality of work in relation to the rewards provided for it. It has only recently become apparent that the biggest drain on my resources was the actual incompetence and sloth of employees who siphoned colossal amounts of money on the most dubious business expenses, awarded themselves fabulous bonuses and generated no net profit for the company whatsoever. I was in a sense being bled dry, while other companies were not only exploiting markets like the automobile industry, oil, avionics and the cinema I hadn't really thought about much, but muscling into markets like steel, shipping and opium where I'd always been the market leader. The combination was lethal, but I just

dismissed it as a temporary *blip* at the time.

“My complacency was partly cracked during the savage trade wars I was involved in. Subsidiaries of my company were attacked by hostile bids from **Second & Third Empire Investments**, **MicroElectronics** and **Black & Brown**. Some of their acquisitions were very nearly successful and the massive cost of retrieving the subsidiaries from take-over required a lot of damaging cuts in other operations and borrowing an enormous amount of money from the **United Standard Bank**, a debt that continues to haunt me now. In the conflict, I had to lay off large numbers of staff, run down some of my concerns and even mortgage off some of the profitable concerns. My only satisfaction is that these trade wars were ultimately won by those companies with the greatest economic muscle and business confidence including my own, and although it led to my position as international number one being surrendered to newer companies, I succeeded in thoroughly ruining **Second & Third** and **MicroElectronics** who became subsidiaries of **United Standard**.

“However I was saddled with enormous debts in excess of my conglomerate’s income; a bloated bureaucracy; and a dependence on heavy industry, shipping and solid fuel at a time when these businesses were really not doing so well any more. I attempted to buy myself out of trouble. I invested heavily into financial institutions, started my own high technology and robotics concerns, financed films and expanded automobile production. Some of these ventures were very successful, but generally the money I was piling in was not reaping the returns I’d hoped for. Indeed, I was asset stripping at a frightening rate. I pulled out of heroin, forestry, space travel and slavery altogether. My travel company was reduced to only a few City-based agencies. And my debt was piling up higher and higher. At the same time I was making no

concessions to my declining wealth in the salaries and perquisites I offered my employees, and continued to gamble fortunes at the gaming tables, sometimes losing billions of guineas in a single evening. My habits were becoming more, not less expensive, and were now an appreciable drain on corporate reserves.

“Soon enough the inevitable occurred and I am approaching bankruptcy. I’ve sold off so many capital assets to cover debts that I have hardly any assets from which to make fresh capital. I also foolishly sacked my old and trusted economic advisers for a new set who made me do crazy things: like holding off all investment altogether; putting more money in advertising and promotions than the returns could justify; dropping core businesses to concentrate on peripheral concerns vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a fluctuating Stock Exchange; and building expensive tower blocks in the City which are still left empty and may even have to be pulled down. The whole thing came to a head and the last few months have just been terrible! Everything I struggled hard to build has come collapsing down on me like a house of cards. Every day is spent divesting myself of yet more assets to cover the interest on debt repayment. It won’t be long now until I am totally ruined!”

Lord Arthur raised up his heavy head and arched it high into the sky, revealing the full magnificence of his tawny throat. He opened his mouth in a silent roar revealing teeth at least as long as my fore-arm. He lowered his head down towards us and stared thoughtfully at Una, who was lying motionless on her back, her hands supporting the base of her enormous belly.

“Has your poor friend got anywhere to stay? She will be giving birth within days.”

Beta leaned over to Una and stroked her matted hair. The pregnant girl made

no response.

“You think it is that serious?” said Beta. “I really don’t know anything about pregnancy! And no, I don’t believe she has anywhere to go.” She leaned over and gazed into Una’s eyes. “Where are you going to give birth? Have you got a bed reserved in a hospital?”

Una stirred and looked up at Beta most piteously.

“No,” she mouthed. “No.” She coughed, causing her belly to shake with the taut pressure of her exhalations. “They won’t accept me. They haven’t enough beds. Not for people who don’t have homes in the City. They turned me away. I asked, but they told me to go. They didn’t want my sort there, they told me. *Not my sort*, they said. I’m just not worth their attention.”

The lion stood up and strode a few paces towards Una. He looked down at her, his muzzle yards above her face. I feared that if he licked her, his tongue would totally engulf her, and his teeth did not look at all agreeable.

“The poor child needs help,” he said. “Do you not have anywhere to take her?”

“We’ve only just arrived in the City,” I answered. “We don’t really know our way around or what to do...”

“Yes, it can be very confusing for you if you’ve never been here before. I have only recently come to see any of the City from anywhere other than through the windows of my limousines, and even with my appreciative size advantage I find the City intimidating. So many people! However, if you like, I can help. I still have some wealth. I can ensure that the girl receives expert medical attention or at least a bed for the night. Judging from her ragged appearance, I imagine even that would be an unfamiliar luxury. Once I despised vagrants and beggars. I would brush them to one

side with a twitch of my massive tail. But now I am so nearly one myself, I can sympathise more. I shall see what I can do for her.”

“That would be wonderful!” exclaimed Beta. “What do you think of that Una? Lord Arthur here will look after you. He’ll make sure you’re alright!”

Una turned her head to one side and looked at the lion with more interest. She seemed only half aware of the world around her, and her smile was a mere flicker across her thin face.

“That would be nice.”

“How do you feel about bringing a child into the world?” the lion asked Una compassionately.

“It’s a mistake. I’m sure of it. A total mistake. I’d’ve had an abortion if I’d known how. The world is such a horrible place. I know that now. Why should I wish to burden another soul with it? So many people! So much suffering! So much crime, violence and abuse! Not nearly enough for too many people! And it’s not as if I am having the child by choice... The bastard who raped me! I hate him! I hate him! I just hope I won’t hate his child.”

Una closed her eyes and lay back again as if exhausted by her tirade.

We sat silently for a few moments. Lord Arthur was clearly embarrassed by Una’s display of despair, which must have put his own suffering into a different context. In the distance, a pair of horses cantered cheerfully by: one of them supporting a red flag in his teeth and the other neighing joyfully at him. The distant rhythm from the bandstand could be heard over the general faint roar of City traffic. The tree’s leaves rustled gently in the early afternoon breeze, its short shadow moving slowly around and away from us, so that the bruises on Una’s legs were now more

visible in the crisp clear light.

“Well...” commented Lord Arthur. “I hope I haven’t bored you too much with my history. It troubles me so much these days. But I still have business to attend to. Unpleasant business, too, but not business I can avoid. The results of the Election are unlikely to have done me any favours. My creditors are going to treat me with even less sympathy than before.” He lowered his head down to look at Una. “I’ll take the poor child with me. She can rest in my mane. It may be thinning, but there’s quite enough of it to keep her warm and comfortable.”

Lord Arthur crouched down on the grass, and with some difficulty Beta and I struggled to get Una onto her feet and then raised her high enough for her to clamber onto the lion’s shoulders. Beta secured her by tying the long tawny hair about her so that she would not slip off. Una sat upright, looking rather wary, her belly partly hidden by the mane and her bare blackened feet sticking out at peculiar angles on either side.

“Are you all right?” Beta wondered, as Lord Arthur gradually rose himself up onto his legs and stood at full height, his head high above us. Una’s small distant face smiled at us bravely as she replied too indistinctly for us to hear.

“She’ll be fine,” the lion assured us. “I’ll take her to a comfortable hotel room and I’ll get some excellent medical attention. Don’t you worry!”

With that he strode off towards the exit of the park leaving us together in the shade of the tree. Beta was still very concerned about Una’s fate, and hoped that we had done the right thing in letting her leave with Lord Arthur.

“There’s nothing we could do,” I assured her. “She must be better off than in the streets or even in the park.”

“I hope you’re right,” Beta reflected as we stood up. We ambled through the park towards the City outside: along the paths, past abstract sculptures, grazing horses, suited office workers eating their sandwiches and children playing on the swings and slides; and then once again plunged ourselves into the urban milieu.

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“**X**enana!” shouted Beta in surprise. “I didn’t expect to see you after so long!”

I was somewhat taken aback by Beta’s exclamation; and looked ahead along the marbled floors of the shopping mall we were in to the subject of Beta’s greetings. It was a woman of about Beta’s age, standing beside the glass sheets enclosing a small fountain scattered with tiny crabs and fish: her pale image reflected on the plate glass of a saddlery emporium. Like Beta she wore no clothes, but unlike her this did not evoke an appearance of naturalness. She was festooned with bangles, rings, necklaces, earrings and jewellery. Her lips were bright red with lipstick. The very prominent application of eyeliner made her eyes unusually striking. Her hair was totally shaved off, and not only on her head. She teetered on black leather platform boots that raised her an extra six inches off the ground, but she was still shorter than me and not much taller than Beta. She held a cigarette in her forefingers and desultorily stroked her chin with her other fingers while inhaling.

“How super!” Xenana exclaimed. “How jolly super! I would never have thought it possible I’d ever see you in the City. And in a mall like this!”

“We were just looking at the shops. We could *never* afford to buy anything here! It’s *so* expensive. The prices are simply Brobdignadian!”

The prices may have been high, but Beta’s wonderment as we had wandered through the marbled, windowed and laminated mall had also been for the comprehensive range of goods on offer. There was everything for every species and every taste. There were imported suits, obscure gramophone records, antiquarian

books, fancy horse-wear, dinosaur eggs, buttered croissants, white chocolate and computer games. We would stand in front of the windows outside the shops or simply wander in and gaze in awe at the video images and material goods that saturated them. It was sometimes difficult to tell amongst the mirrors and windows whether we were in the confines of a store or in the general walkway. Bright artificial light illuminated everything. Wherever we went we were followed by a sometimes annoyingly indistinct and sometimes annoyingly disruptive wallpaper of music ranging from the ambient and the classical to the irritating and the banal. At intervals we came across chairs or benches, fountains, statues, clock-towers, garden beds, wooden bridges or glass elevators which promised further delights on other floors. We pursued a series of tall escalators up and down and around a never-ending series of shoppers' paradises, occasionally approaching the glass ceiling protecting the mall from the elements outside. The air-conditioning pumped out by the shops made it much cooler inside the mall than the warm sunny day outside would have one expect it to be.

"You certainly don't dress any flipping different to at home!" Xenana commented.

"I don't see any good reason why I should," Beta retorted. "But your appearance surprises me. When you left the Village you said you'd never walk naked again and here you are..."

Xenana laughed. "Ohh, Beta! Your naïveté is so wonderful! There is a blinking world of difference between the nudity of the Village and the current fashions in the City. But don't let's quarrel! It's *super* to see you. Absolutely super!"

The two girls embraced.

"I wish you hadn't shaved off all your hair," commented Beta sadly. "It was so

beautiful!”

“You mustn’t get too attached to such ephemeral things, Beta. But who is your friend? He doesn’t come from the Country, does he?”

“No, he’s from the Suburbs,” Beta explained, who then introduced me to Xenana: a good friend of hers from the Village who had left to live in the City as soon as she was able. “You don’t regret it yet, do you?”

“Not at all!” Xenana claimed. “After living here, I just don’t see how I could ever live anywhere as slow and uneventful as the Village!” She glanced at her cigarette butt and noticing that it had burnt down to the filter tossed it to one side. “I’m glad you’ve come to the City. It’s a great place! Are you staying long?”

“We don’t know! We only arrived last night. But, what about you, Xenana? What are you doing these days?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. I don’t have a proper job as such, but I get enough work to see me through jolly well. I help out at a record store where they sell white label twelve inch vinyl. I sometimes work at clothes shops and alternative book shops. I do some bar work some evenings or just help out at night clubs. I sometimes do a bit of my own business - selling things I buy in cheap outside the City for less than you’d normally pay for them here. A bit of entrepreneurship if you like. There’s no shortage of ways to earn money in this place if you know people. And believe me, Beta, I *know* people!” Xenana’s broad grin threatened the fabric of her lipstick, clearly delighted with her social success. “I know *so many* flipping people! When I lived in the village, I just didn’t think it possible that you could know so many, so very many of them. Even when I first arrived here and it all seemed so frightening - you know, the tall buildings, the crowds, the traffic, the constant rushing around - I didn’t believe it was possible to

know so many people. And now I just *do!*” Xenana giggled for joy and slightly bounced up and down. “I’ve arrived you see, Beta! I’ve arrived! I’m as much part of the City scene as anyone else. And that’s a great buzz! It’s the biggest high you could *ever* have!”

“I’m glad to see you’re happy here,” Beta remarked. “You always said you’d do better in the City. Do you meet many others from the Village here?”

“Oh absolutely flipping millions of them, Beta! People are flooding into the City from the Country every day. I’m sure that’s one reason why there are just so many people living here. And you can’t blame them. There’s so much more here than in the Country. If you can’t get a job in the City and make it in whatever you want then where *can* you go? And the scene here is *so* wild. It’s where you can really get into the groove!” Xenana fished her hand into the ethnic leather handbag that dangled decorously over her shoulder and pulled out a cigarette case and lighter. She proffered cigarettes in our direction, not really expecting us to accept them, put one into her mouth and lit it theatrically. “But come back to my bedsit. I insist! You can’t just meet me in the City and not visit my home. I can get us something to eat if you like.”

Beta and I were easily persuaded, and followed Xenana through the maze of shopping aisles to the City streets outside. With Xenana leading the way, the mass of people and traffic was no obstacle at all, although it was impossible to remember the details of a route which took us through a series of quiet side roads, small parks, cobbled gas-lit antique shopping streets and finally via paved walkways, past swings, slides and a small river, to some tall apartment blocks sporting names such as Equestrian House, Cardiovascular Villas and Xanadu Mansion. However exotic the building’s title, they were essentially all identical towers heights of

punctuated balconies, mostly wholly anonymous and with doorways guarded by a row of named buttons and intercom grills.

“Home Sweet Home!” announced Xenana pushing open the door to Bodhisattva Heights, after using a complicated series of keys and punching the keys of encrypted locks. We followed her through the heavy door which slammed behind us, sucking dust into the foyer from the busy street outside. Xenana attached another key to her mail box and opened it to reveal a sudden cascade of unsolicited mail relating to financial opportunities, holidays abroad and local window-cleaning services. She sorted out one single manila-enveloped letter and deposited a kaleidoscope of brightly coloured mail into one of the overflowing plastic rubbish bins lined up on wheels just opposite the green battered metal mail boxes. “It’s only a bill!” Xenana commented, placing it into her handbag. She scanned the clear metal sliding doors of the lifts where angular numbers mutated in illuminated displays to indicate the floors that the lifts were currently passing by. “I’m on the fourteenth, so we’ll have to take the lift.”

We waited for several minutes as the lifts descended, then rose and then descended again, but one finally arrived on the ground floor where a small purple pony with a very long tail trotted out smelling lewdly of perfume. She pursed her heavily lipsticked lips at us and trotted on, wagging her buttocks lasciviously from side to side. Xenana smiled indulgently. We clambered into the escalator to be joined by a hefty crab wearing a large black hat and an unfiltered cigarette who took up more than half the space. The numbers displayed above the door transfigured from **0** to **14**, and the escalator doors opened to free us from the claustrophobia of the tiny room, to pace along a narrow corridor, past the constant thump of audio systems emanating from

behind the doors that lined the corridor, and then, after another ritual of key-turning, we entered Xenana's bedsit.

I had never seen such a small home before in my life. Even Beta was astonished by how cramped it was, and she'd already told me how much smaller Village homes were to those in the Suburbs. Most of Xenana's room was dominated by a single bed, surrounded by the surfaces of furniture serving one, two or three different purposes. A shower unit stood in one corner, from which jutted out the porcelain of a sink or washing basin. A microwave oven stood underneath a television screen and a small chair was squeezed just behind the door and had to be moved every time the door was opened. Xenana seemed very proud of her home, however. She clambered over the bed to spread the ragged curtains to let in the slant of the early evening sun, and proudly displayed a view of other tower blocks, some of which being so much more monstrous than the others must have been in the financial district. She then switched on the audio system positioned at the head of the bed, and the speakers scattered about the room emitted an insistent heavy percussive rhythm sprinkled with samples, vocals and electronic doodling.

"It wasn't easy to get this bedsit!" Xenana explained. "It was *flipping* hard! And it's *so* expensive as well. About a thousand three hundred guineas a week! And that's *cheap* for a bedsit as well appointed as this so close to the City centre. Most of my money goes on paying rent! But it's worth it. Most of the time I've been in the City I've had to sleep on friend's couches or in their beds. I just never got it together to rent a place of my own. But now I have. And it really *is* super! I'm absolutely independent. I can do what I like. And I've got the whole of the flipping City to groove in!"

Beta was still reeling from Xenana's admission of the bedsit's expense. "More than a thousand guineas a week. That's seventy or eighty thousand guineas a year! You could buy the whole Village for much less than that!"

"You get used to these sort of expenses after a while," Xenana commented, sitting down at the head of the bed. "Is it any wonder the country's in such a mess when you've got such ridiculous price disparities! But now I'm jolly used to it. Anything priced with a number with less than two zeros isn't worth doodly squat."

Beta and I sat cautiously at the foot of the bed which bounced with a life of its own after the introduction or removal of any weight. We twisted our bodies round so we could face Xenana who was lighting up another cigarette. The room was already infused with the smell of nicotine and of somewhat sweeter substances the nature of which was hinted by a scratched mirror on its side, a few torn shreds of cardboard and the blackened neck of an exaggeratedly bent spoon.

"What do you do in the City, Xenana?" Beta wondered.

"What don't I do, Beta?" Xenana boasted. "There's just everything to do that you could possibly hope for. It's just one endless round. Once I tried to keep a diary, Beta. You know like we did when we lived in the Village. I thought, there's so much excitement in my life, so much that's new and groovy, I'd better get it recorded. But clubbing, partying, all the boyfriends I've had (and not always serially), the bingeing, the orgying, the indulgence...! Soon keeping a diary just got out of hand. I was a week out of date in making an entry. Where was I? What the heck was the guy's name? What had we consumed? I just couldn't remember. It was all a haze. And then I let it slip by a month. And when it gets that bad - you can't remember anything you blinking well did a month ago. In the City a week's nearly a lifetime. And a month's nearly an

eternity! I can't even remember what was fashionable a month ago. Was it long hair, short hair, curly hair, no hair? Was it platforms, stilettos or flats? Was it shorts, minis, jeans or crinolines? Was it monetarism, millenarianism, communism or eco-awareness? It all blurs into one grey rush of motion. All you know is that you had a groovy time. The drugs were absolutely fabulous! The vibes were out of sight! The sex was simply super! You just keep to the rhythm, and let the rhythm flow!"

Beta seemed a little puzzled by Xenana's words. "I don't really understand more than half of what you say now," she remarked with a weak laugh. "But I'm still very glad you're enjoying yourself in the City."

"And you will too!" remarked Xenana, stubbing out her cigarette in an ash tray and leaping up. "I'll get us something to eat and then I'll take you to the Cancer Club. I got a few free tickets one of my boyfriends gave me. It's really kicking. The jam is really wild. You'll enjoy it."

She opened a few cupboards where cans of food were carefully stacked one above the other in the very little space available, and pulled out a combination of cans. She then opened them with an electric can-opener and with a deft combination of cooking rings and micro-wave cooker she managed to prepare quite a reasonable mushy meal in which all pretence of subtlety was totally engulfed by spices, curry and rich sauces. However, both Beta and I were extremely hungry.

There were several hours from when we'd eaten until Xenana felt it right to head off to the night club, but this time drifted away idly and lazily as Xenana chatted about her life in the City, the boyfriends she'd had, the drugs she'd taken and the more amusing or entertaining anecdotes of her new life. Occasionally she listened politely as Beta talked about life in the Village. How there were plans to redecorate the Village

Hall. How some of the small-holdings were trying out a new breed of heifer. The trouble some of the horses had given in demanding higher rates for their services.

It was clear, however, that Xenana wasn't really that interested and took the opportunity of rolling marijuana infused cigarettes as Beta was speaking. The air in her room soon filled up with thick smoke which irritated my eyes and made me extremely dozy. In the background, Xenana's choice of music began to take on shades of meaning and relevance that had hitherto seemed rather hidden in an aural wallpaper of noise and rhythm. I lay back on the bed, while Xenana continued her account of City life, occasionally being nudged as she passed a reefer across to me. I made an attempt to be fairly abstemious. I noticed Beta had refused to touch any of it, and any drug other than alcohol was extremely rare in the Suburbs. It certainly wasn't sold across the newsagents counters as it was in the City.

It was very late when Xenana finally took us to the Night Club, but the City, however, had clearly not gone to sleep. The streets were brightly lit and although less crowded than during the day, they were far from barren. Xenana flagged down a horse-drawn carriage and asked the horse to take us to the club which he gladly did, chatting as he went on about how there were too many foreigners in the City these days and how the change of government to the Red Party spelt disaster for small businesses such as his own. As we trotted along, I observed how much the life on the City streets had changed from the day time. Although it was cooler at night, there were many more women dressed in very few clothes and quite a few more than I'd seen before dressed like Xenana in virtually nothing and their scalps shaved to the skin. Gangs of youths sauntered along, yelling randomly at other pedestrians and dressed in peculiarly dandified clothes contrasting with a partiality for working-man's boots. A

gaggle of what I at first thought were women, but then recognised as men dressed up as women, emerged in a giggling cackling crew from one of the many wine-bars, restaurants and pubs that lined the roads and appeared more prominent at night when the shops were closed and security bars obscured their windows.

The Cancer Club was no different from the outside to the many other Night Clubs we'd passed en route. The exterior was emblazoned with inviting lights in blue and red neon, with the illuminated image of a crab flashing on and off over the doorway. Xenana tripped out of the carriage, paid the horse for his services and strode boldly to the door where a large aggressive-looking crab was standing, clicking his claws in tune to the distant pulse of music emanating from within. Beta and I hastily hurried behind her, aware that in comparison to her and all the other club-goers we looked rather too obviously like non-sophisticates. I had thought that Xenana's appearance was relatively unusual or at best an extreme representation of City fashion, but judging from the bare flesh, the shaved heads and very prominent make-up adopted by both the men and women entering the Cancer Club, her appearance was not at all remarkable.

"Yeah, Xenana! 'Course you can! And your friend and her boyfriend too!" sniffed the crab doorman amiably. "You didn't really need the invites at all. Keep them for another night!"

We followed Xenana through the heavy door and up a staircase spangled by little lights, along a corridor decorated with images of exotic animals and into an enormous dance hall which was far from full but fairly lively. Music similar to that which Xenana had been entertaining us in her bedsit boomed out distinctly and deafeningly from massive speakers dotted about the place, and the spectrum of single

coloured lights beaming from all directions somehow failed to properly illuminate a place where visibility was obscured by mirrors, floor-clinging clouds of smoke and the long shadows of the guests. There was dancing on dance-floors which were positioned all about the place and where people, many dressed like Xenana, were gyrating, gesturing and gesticulating in full abandon.

The centre-piece of all the attention was a pulpit on which a disc jockey was energetically busying herself on a collection of turntables, electronic equipment and stacks of vinyl and compact discs. Generally her head was face down, a bald pate facing to the audience, concentrating on what next to play. Then she would raise her face, perspiration visibly illuminated by the powerful beams, and look out at the audience as if surprised that there were any there. Not all her audience were dancing. Several were sitting on stools and chairs around the several bars or near the cafeterias serving convenience food.

Xenana sat us down on a comfortable black leather sofa looking down on a dance floor occupied by a sideways-dancing crab and a sinuously shaking snake. She rushed off to the bar, which was wholly composed of mirrors and tiny bulbs, leaving Beta and me to chat as best we could. To make ourselves heard, we had to lean quite close to each other and shout in our ears. On a sofa nearby, a gibbon with a hypodermic needle was carefully injecting himself in an arm bandaged tight by a handkerchief, while his companion, another gibbon, inhaled on a clay pipe shaped like a funnel, giving off great clouds of dark smoke. Xenana returned after a few minutes with three bottles of beer, each with a lemon inserted in the opening where the metal top had been wrested off. She handed us a beer each.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Xenana shouted at us, bottle in hand, “but I’ve just

seen a jolly good friend of mine over there with his mates. It's absolutely ages since we last met. You don't mind if I go off with him do you?" Beta shook her head. "That's groovy! You'll find oodles to do here. Dancing, boozing, food! Everything! Just get on down! I'll see you later!"

With that, Xenana disappeared off into the dark shadows leaving us rather unsure of ourselves in a quite intimidating claustrophobic environment. I wasn't knowledgeable enough about the music to be able to dance to it: an ignorance shared with Beta when I suggested to her that perhaps we ought to dance.

"I'd like to! But not to *this*!"

This was probably appropriate as the disc jockey had very much increased the beats per minute of the music, which was cut with frantic samples and disconcertingly frequent breaks in the tempo and melody. The dancers became more frenetic with their movement, pumping the air with their fists, kicking their feet out like mules and shaking perspiration down from their foreheads onto the increasingly damp patches on their chests.

"Is there anywhere quieter do you think?"

We eased ourselves out of the sofa and wandered around the perimeter of the night club that was beginning to get full now it was getting well past midnight. The place was much larger than I'd imagined. When I thought we'd come to its edge there was yet another dance floor on the other side of a glass pillar or up some sparkling steps. But eventually we found a quieter bar where the music was still principally electronic but resembled more the sound of waves battering against the shore than that of a pile driver battling with a road-drill. We sat with our bottles of beer on stools at the edge of the room regarding the clientele, who were generally rather less strikingly

dressed than Xenana or others on the main dance floor.

A penguin waddled towards us with a bottle of beer held tightly in a black flipper and his other flipper pressing a large hard-back book against his chest. He stopped by the bar-stool and looked rather askance at the distance between himself and the counter where he could rest either his beer or his book.

“Do you want some help?” asked Beta, in perhaps a louder voice than she needed as we were no longer in such a very noisy environment.

The penguin eyed Beta a little suspiciously, but appeared to conclude she was unlikely to cause any trouble.

“Yes, that would be very welcome, thank you!” he said cautiously, allowing Beta to take his beer and book and place it on the counter while he pulled himself up onto the stool in a feat of avian ingenuity and sat opposite us around the circular plastic table. “You’re new to the City aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I confessed. “It’s all very strange...”

“...And confusing!” Beta added. “Especially in this Night Club. It’s nearly two o’clock and, rather than quieter, the place is just getting busier and busier! Don’t people in the City ever go to bed?”

“Oh they do!” the penguin assured us. “They just get up correspondingly later. The City never sleeps, they say, and in some ways it gets more awake as the hours pass by.”

“Are you a frequent night-clubber?” wondered Beta.

The penguin’s appearance certainly didn’t have a great deal in common to Xenana’s, except perhaps for his nudity, the fashionableness of which was somewhat undercut by the tartan scarf he wore around his neck.

“It’s a place to go at night,” the penguin replied cryptically. “I’m a post-graduate student at the City University which means that I am under no pressure to get up in the morning.”

“What are you studying?” I wondered.

“I’m researching the famous novelist, Oscar Xavier Peregrine, for my doctoral thesis,” sniffed the penguin, indicating the novel he had entitled **Winchester Revisited** with the author’s name occupying nearly as much space on the cloth-covered page as the title. “Are you familiar with his works?”

“Not at all,” I admitted. “What sort of novels does he write?”

“*Did* he write,” corrected the penguin. “Oh all sorts. There can’t be a genre he didn’t attempt and master. He was a genius of eclecticism and a master of all styles. Oscar Peregrine started his literary career before graduation from university in Lambdeth with **Porcelain and Diapers**, the first of a series of gritty, naturalistic novels based on his intimate experiences of poverty as a student (which I can fully empathise) and the grim world of his working class childhood. In this, and following novels, such as **Torn Upholstery** and **Desolate Days of Memory**, Peregrine struggled hard to capture the essential grimness of life: the dirt underneath the fingernails, the grass growing through cracks in the concrete in the backyard, the sheer ghastliness of the ignorance and stupidity manifested by some of the working class. He captures a world of bare-knuckle boxing, dog fights, solvent and child abuse.

“These works soon established a strong reputation amongst serious critics, although his books sold in the tens rather than the thousands and he had to survive on government grants and sponsorships. These are the years in which he married his first wife who committed suicide by swallowing a rolling pin and had to care for their

triplets by himself. These grim years are well illustrated in his books at that time.”

“Why didn’t he write books that people might want to read?” Beta wondered.

“A question his publishers often posed to him. But of course he was writing to satisfy his literary muse, not to pander to the base tastes of his public. However, the demands of his creditors and the death of his second wife who was chewed up by a defective meat mincer persuaded him to write more commercially profitable books. He was particularly upset that the critics had criticised his novel, **Misery is My Only Friend**, as being too pessimistic and making rather depressing reading. He then wrote a number of pornographic novels under certain pseudonyms such as Cynthia Fox, Fanny Truman and Monica Temple. They were hailed as classics of the genre and sold in enormous quantities from the top shelf of book shops at railway stations throughout the world. It is only recently that it has been established that Peregrine was the author of **Knickers for Free**, **Sex Supermarket Sausages** and **Confessions of a Prostitute’s Maid**. Up until now no connection had been made between the sudden improvement in Peregrine’s material and psychological welfare, his marriage to a part-time prostitute and the release on the market of pornographic novels with a fondness for the grittier details in their characters’ environments.

“Peregrine’s more literary works took a turn away from naturalism to a kind of inner monologue where from the beginning to the end of his novels there was no external reference to a world beyond the ramblings of the central character. In these novels, time seems to stretch out endlessly, with details becoming larger and larger. Whole paragraphs might concentrate on accounts of blowing the nose or scratching the ear. Whole chapters may involve nothing much more than walking from the front door of a house to the front gate. These novels regained Peregrine’s reputation

amongst the literary critics who praised him for revealing the depth and scope of minutiae, but he didn't really gain any commercial success under his own name for books like **Breaking Wind** and **To The Bus Stop**, until he combined this new style with his skills at writing pornographic literature and with his novel, **Bump and Grind**, managed to sell in substantial quantities under his own name. This is the account of the sexual congress of a couple on a single afternoon, which in Peregrine's story takes rather longer to read than it could possibly have taken to happen.

"Peregrine was clearly very encouraged by the success of this novel, and this encouraged a great change of direction where he started writing a series of science fiction and science fantasy trilogies. His **Swords of Andromeda** trilogy featured wizards, hairy-chested heroes, large breasted heroines, large doses of mysticism and the meaning of life, and became a classic of the genre. The books are incredibly thick and in places unreadable as he became rather obsessed with neologisms. In places it is quite difficult to know what is supposed to be happening as every noun and most of the verbs were invented by Peregrine. His **Gannium Arsenide** trilogy is set in a future dominated by homosexual drug-pushers and computer games, and he set himself the difficult task of understanding a sub-culture of which he had only the vaguest previous knowledge. This was why for a period he and his fourth wife, later to die of inhalation of hydrogen peroxide and MDMA, became rather more famous for their drug-taking excesses than for their literary output.

"He was later to receive treatment at one of the best detoxification units in the City, where he returned to more overtly literary novels. His novels now struggled to penetrate beneath the veneer of vocabulary and syntax to get at the deeper and more profound meanings of life. In his novel **Having**, he retains conventional English but the

plot is randomly organised and events occur in deliberately haphazard fashion with regards to their normal temporal sequence. In **What**, he takes English sentences and reorganises them, so that the sentence may begin with present perfect verb and finish with the subject noun. In **Xbldwq**, Peregrine abandons the conventions of language altogether, making this undoubtedly the most difficult of all his books to read. Few of his neologisms contain vowels in expected places and few of the words are anything but invention. Many critics accused Peregrine of self-indulgence, but now most agree that this may indeed be the man's masterpiece. It stands as a statement of the impotence of language against the pressures of an impossible world.

"Peregrine took the criticisms to heart however and abandoned his project to write a novel composed entirely of the letter **x**. Instead, he started work on his unfinished masterpiece, **Winchester Revisited**, in which, to a certain extent, he returned to a more naturalistic style of writing. This book tries to incorporate everything within it. There are great themes of love, death, war, peace, crime, punishment, pride and prejudice. There is the clash of sword, the didacticism of religious discourse, great mythological symbolism, digressions on feminism, poetry, politics and sport. The book brings in characters and themes as immense as those of any book. Each page is a towering structure of carefully crafted style, beautifully drawn characterisation, vivid dialogue, and, yet, it is unfinished. It is barely a tenth the length that Peregrine would have desired. A mere fourteen chapters long: even though they still comprise well over two thousand closely printed pages."

"Why didn't he finish it?" Beta demanded.

"His sixth wife killed him with a dictionary. We now know that she was a homicidal maniac who feasted on aborted fetuses. In any case, he was making very

slow progress with it. He would constantly write, revise and rewrite every page, every paragraph and every word of the novel. He wanted it to be perfect. He worked from early morning until late at night, pausing only to eat sandwiches and go to the toilet (chores which he reputedly resented). So now all we are left with is an unfinished canon of work and a bottomless source of material for doctoral theses.”

There suddenly erupted from the bar, a very loud neighing and clicking of claws. We turned our heads round to see several young people dressed in dark green collarless suits, rather similar to those I’d seen in the town of Rupert.

“Illicit Party!” sniffed the penguin disdainfully. “Since they’ve been around, they’ve been nothing but trouble. I don’t know much about their ideology. In fact, if you ask me, I don’t think they really have an ideology at all. They’ve just got a leader and an excuse to cause trouble. Just look at them!”

A large crab held a spaniel by locking his arms behind him, while a horse taunted him and insistently pressed a hoof against his chest. The spaniel was wearing a tee-shirt proclaiming **Go To Bed With a Red**. The horse shoved his muzzle malevolently against the spaniel’s face, eyeball to eyeball.

“So you Red bastards are going to change things, are you? Rob the rich and feed the poor, will you? More like raise the flipping taxes and turn the country into a glorified trades union! You might think you’re going to flipping change things, but not before we do a bit of changing you first, you ugly bastard!”

“I didn’t say anything!” protested the spaniel as one of the aggressors spat in his face. “I’m just wearing a tee-shirt, nothing more!”

“I distinctly heard you bad mouth me!” exclaimed a young jackal wearing a large button emblazoned with Chairman President Rupert’s face. “You told me that the

Illicit Party was scum and didn't deserve to win the Election. You said that the Reds were going to flipping *wipe the floor* with the Illicit Party."

"I never! I never!" gasped the spaniel shaking his muzzle from side to side. "I wouldn't! I'm a pacifist! I don't believe in violence!"

"Don't Believe In Violence..." repeated the crab hitting the spaniel forcefully on one side of the face, forcing his head to reel back, blood dribbling from his nostrils. "Don't Believe In Violence! Yellow Red scum!"

The bar speedily emptied while these representatives of the Illicit Party tormented the spaniel. The bar steward had disappeared and no other staff could be seen.

"We'd better get moving!" remarked the penguin softly. "These Illicitists look like they're gunning for trouble."

"Why's that?" whispered Beta helping him down from his chair and handing him his book.

"Election disappointment, I suppose. Hatred of all the other parties. In fact the Illicit Party, like the Black Party, is a rather violent lot on the whole."

"Did I hear you bad mouth Rupert and the Illicit Party?" asked a small pony wearing a Rupert badge on his harness and a green beret on his head.

"Not at all!" the penguin said carefully. "I was simply saying ..."

"You're a flipping Red too, aren't you?" the pony repeated pushing his muzzle against the penguin's face. He glanced at the book that the penguin dropped. "And Red propaganda too! It's you bastards who're going to bugger up this country..."

"I'm not a Red!" insisted the penguin as the pony pushed him back against the wall.

Beta glanced at me fearfully, unsure whether to interfere. The decision however was made by the jackal who had been punching the spaniel in the face and left him on the floor for his equine companion to kick with his hooves.

“If my friend says you’re a Red, you’re a Red!” the jackal stated emphatically poking the penguin in the chest. “You’re a flipping Red. And your flipping friends are Reds, too, I guess!” He snarled at us and was soon backed up by a group of his companions who loomed over us. “You’re all Reds! And we’re going to kill you!” He thumped the penguin very hard on the face with the book and left the penguin in a pool of blood where the pony feebly prodded him with his hooves.

“Illicit Bastards!” shouted a group of gorillas in black leather outfits decorated with swastikas and iron crosses. “You making trouble again at the expense of the pacifist Reds! You just don’t know what a real fight is!”

One gorilla unravelled a long chain from around his waist and flicked it aggressively on the ground.

“Come on lads! No trouble here, eh?” spoke the large crab we’d met at the door accompanied by some bestial acquaintances. “Let’s just make our way home before the police arrive, eh?”

“Don’t you flipping count on it!” snarled the jackal pulling out a flick-knife from a pocket and brandishing it.

“We better run!” I cautioned Beta urgently.

We took advantage of the stand off between the three groups to race down the stairs and onto the main dance floor, leaving the penguin and spaniel groaning in pools of blood. We hadn’t left a moment too soon, as a terrific yell erupted as we ran away followed by the crash of large bodies impacting against each other. A stool flew

through the air a few yards ahead of us and smashed against a mirrored post. Glass shattered in an explosion of shards, so we ran the faster.

While we ran in one direction, young people of all species were running in the other direction towards the scene of the conflict: several carrying knives, broken bottles and even guns. We found ourselves in the main dance floor where the music was still pounding out loudly, but emptying rapidly. Most people were picking up their things and leaving. The exits were jammed with people struggling to get out.

“Thank goodness I’ve found you!” exclaimed Xenana running towards us with some very similarly dressed friends. “What’s going on? Why’s everyone leaving?”

“There’s a big political fight, I reckon,” one of her friends remarked. “The Illicit bastards have been spoiling for one all day. I saw a few really aggressive looking people. Like they were looking for a flipping fight rather than a good time!”

“It was where we were,” Beta breathlessly replied. “They attacked this penguin we were talking to. They beat him up really badly!”

“Come on, Beta! We’re getting the heck out of here!” Xenana cried.

Then just as we were about to run to the exit, some very loud bangs rang out in rapid succession. This was followed by a frantic chasing from the exit to our direction as horses in black leather outfits came galloping in carrying some very ugly small men dressed in black on their backs waving guns and clubs.

“More Blacks!” someone shouted.

Beta and I ran off to a chink of light in the distance that turned out to be an emergency exit that had been opened. Behind us the violence was getting worse, illustrated by loud crashes and what may have been the wholesale destruction of the record decks judging from the abrupt manner by which the music came to a scratchy

end. We panted in the cool air outside, along with others similarly frightened and worried.

“Where’s Xenana?” wondered Beta looking around her.

There was no sign of her, but we didn’t feel safe in such close proximity to the Night Club, from which came a cacophony of screams, shouts and commotion. We were soon running down dark alley-ways framed by towering buildings, occasionally illuminated by the light from windows above or the neon lights of smaller night clubs and wine bars that were still open.

Eventually we were far enough away from the Cancer Club to consider ourselves fairly safe from attack, but now we had the inevitable worry about where to sleep for the night. The answer was actually fairly evident as we passed people huddled up in doorways or inside cardboard boxes. The street was the only hotel we knew that wouldn’t turn us away, so we reluctantly searched for somewhere to sleep in the alley-ways less uncomfortable than most.

We eventually found a pile of cardboard boxes behind what might well have been a shop during the day, judging from the exotic nature of some of the rubbish. We nestled in some artificial fur toys broken free from a box and tried to sleep in the sinister and haunting night sounds of the City. Even now, there was a constant roar of traffic emerging from nearby streets. Occasionally hoots, screams and other nocturnal noises interrupted our sleep. Beta huddled close to me for company. She was unquestionably upset by the turn of events.

“I’m so frightened!” she whispered, hearing the howl of wolves. “I hope we’re going to be all right!”

I nodded, grateful for the intimate closeness of her body and fearing every

sound we could hear. The rustle of rubbish, the whistle of wind through metal fire escapes and the distant sounds all had a sinister edge to them. It was also not that warm, although Beta appeared to notice the cold rather less than I.

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On awakening, the alley in which we had been sleeping seemed if anything rather less inviting in the early morning light. I looked over to Beta who was still sleeping. Clearly she was rather less accustomed to the comfort of modern mattresses, duvets and electric blankets than me, and even without clothes to wrap around her had succeeded in slumbering through the chill night air and the now rather more insistent, if distant, roar of traffic. We were far from alone: a family of horse-shoe crabs was dozing fairly close to our elbows even though I had been totally unaware of their presence until then. A scrawny goat was wandering down the alleyway towards us, poking his muzzle into the waste bins and pulling out unappetising items of food and chewed them in his mouth with little discretion and less relish. I watched as the goat gradually approached us, and nudged Beta to wake up.

She stared at me through a bleary film of sleep and smiled sadly. “The second night of sleeping rough!” She remarked. “We mustn’t make this too much of a habit.”

“Indeed not,” I agreed, standing up and helping her to her feet. “What we need now is breakfast.”

Beta yawned, blinking her sleep-swollen eyes. “That would be very welcome!” She glanced up and down the alley, where the goat was now joined by a ewe with a pronounced limp and a rolled cigarette dangling from her mouth. The two of them nuzzled through the dustbins and black plastic rubbish bags. “Where shall we go?”

I didn’t know any better than Beta, but we followed the trail of narrow back-roads past others who were waking up from a night of uncomfortable rest. I had never

before seen such a sorry collection of ragged sleeping bags and unravelling blankets, any one of which, nonetheless, would have been extremely welcome when I was trying to sleep. Eventually, we emerged into an area of much wider and busier roads. However, it was apparent that we were in a quite different part of the City than the one where we'd arrived the previous day.

What had most impressed us when we had come off the train was the grandeur, scale and opulence of the City. Everything was so shining, bright and modern. Here, however, the atmosphere was noted more for its poverty and dereliction. Although the roads were busy, this was mainly of vehicles drawn by sheep or goats or ancient bicycles. The cacophony of bicycle bells and occasional klaxon swamped the roar of car engines which in any case belonged to vehicles that were very old, rusted and barely roadworthy. The uneven pavement was constructed of badly cracked flagstones and potholed by menacing holes where black water festered from past rain showers. Along the kerb were the occasional lamp-posts, some standing at peculiar angles to the horizontal and many with wires dangling loose from vandalised lamps.

The buildings shared the same general air of dereliction. Many shops had boards covering the windows or were rimmed by sharp icicles of glass. Those windows that were still intact were protected from vandalism by panels. The places where people lived were equally as unwelcoming and decrepit. The buildings were not nearly as tall as most of those we'd seen the day before, but still much taller than any to be found in the Suburbs.

All the walls were luridly decorated by aerosol graffiti which in imaginative graphic letters and interesting flourishes said nothing either comprehensible or pertinent. **RamRods. Claw Killer. Pretty as Sugar.** Some graffiti were more

understandable and complemented the faded Election posters for the Red, Black and Illicit Parties. **Reds Roger. Blacks Suck. Cats Out. Rivers of Black.** Every inch of wall underneath and between the thickening and peeling coat of posters was splattered with aerosol paint, and most posters were obscenely defaced.

“I don’t feel very welcome here,” shivered Beta, huddling up close to me. “I don’t like the way people are looking at me.”

The goats balanced above our head on unsteady scaffolding, the small crabs in overalls scattering by my feet and the chimpanzee sitting idly on the stairs all appeared more intent on their own thoughts than on us, but now that Beta had put the thought into my mind it did seem to me that we were followed by suspicious eyes as we walked along. A gang of baboons in black leather outfits and motor-cycle helmets blocked the way as they strode slowly along. As we overtook them one scowled extremely menacingly at me, sending a bolt of static through my cheeks.

We stopped for breakfast at a ramshackle van parked beside the remains of a demolished building enclosed by a ring of high electric wire and boards warning people not to enter the site. More ominously were the silhouetted illustrations of a figure being hit by lightening and the unsubtle warning **Danger of Death**. Two or three vultures ignored the signs and perched on top of what had once been the main entrance to a large building, where they were smoking some exceedingly long cigarettes and playing idly with flick knives.

Breakfast was cheaper than we had become accustomed to. We each had coffee in paper cups which were difficult to hold without spilling some of the hot tasteless liquid and scalding our fingers. We shared a couple of white bread sandwiches stuffed with brown sauce, onions and a very fine sliver of cheese. The whole breakfast

came to just over fifteen guineas.

We surveyed the district from the corner of the demolition site, across a road junction controlled by a very busy octopus in a police uniform, to the distant sight of the taller and grander buildings of the City. Although they were clearly within sight, they seemed very distant and remote. Peeling Election posters were everywhere, some blown by the wind across the grimy unwashed streets against doorways and into the alleyways which led off the main streets at regular intervals. A collection of lambs and kids were gathered outside a school, wearing baseball caps put on back to front and words ornately shaved into their fleeces. A small square of grass was locked in behind railings in which a few sparrows had gathered around a statue of an eminent hadrosaur and idly played cards near a hamster in a threadbare overcoat slumped in a puddle of vomit and urine.

Beta pointed at the tall buildings in the distance, while chewing at a mouthful of obdurate dough. "It's incredible to think that the City has such great variety! There's so much wealth over there while here everything is squalid and rundown."

"I hope you're not putting down the flipping City?" abruptly interjected a large raven with a flat cap on his head. "You blinking yokels, you come from the blooming Country and all you can flipping well do is flipping complain. I'm City born and bred, me! And I'm proud of it. There's nowhere in the world as good as what the City is!"

"I wasn't saying that I didn't like the City..." protested Beta looking down at the match stick protruding from the corner of raven's beak.

"Yes, you was! I heard you! Blinking ingrates, you Country people. If it wasn't for us in the City working hard and making money all you Country people would know it. You don't bring sweet fanny adams into the realm. How can you? Everything in the

Country is just so blinking cheap. Cheap in price and cheap in quality. It's us what bring in the wealth with all our banks and business and things."

"I was just saying that it was strange how much wealthier that part of the City is compared to this part."

"Whyn't you say? That's different. A totally different bowl of lard, as they say. Yeah, over there is where the nobs live. They're the ones with all the blinking money. And what do they leave us, the workers? Not fanny adams, that's what! They've got all that money and all those blinking tall buildings and snooty shops and we're left with all the slums. Well, now we've got the Reds in government at long last and those blinking nobs had better look out. We'll get their hundred thousand guinea carpets, their million guinea clothes, their ten million guinea houses. It's all for the blinking workers now, ain't it!"

"That ain't quite what the Red Party said they'd do in their manifesto, John," remarked a billy goat in an ill-fitting sports tracksuit and large soled running shoes. "That ain't what they said they'd do. It might be what you *want* them to do, but it ain't what they said they'd do. But God in Heaven, I wouldn't mind it if it was, you know what I mean? I wouldn't say no to some of the other slice of the pie, me. I work hard all me life, you know what I mean, and I never ain't got nothing for it. And there are those like Her blinking Maphrodite what do nothing and get loads of dosh. I'd like some of the action, I can tell you."

We left the goat and raven debating and walked along the road in the general direction of the tall buildings, looking forward to the return to the relative comfort of the more touristic City. We passed a pack of hyenas who were feasting on some rotting meat, left outside a butcher's shop which had suffered from very severe

vandalism. The more literate graffiti **Meat Is Murder** was sprayed around it, an opinion not shared by the hyenas. One raised his head from the antelope carcass he was feasting on, blood coursing down his jowls, and glared at us malevolently. Although it was unlikely that either Beta or I would consider challenging him for a taste of the red and pink raw flesh, he appeared to be warning us off just in case.

We passed by the steps of a tall apartment block even more derelict than most but not boarded up or chicken-wired. Most windows had lost their glass but several people were idly leaning out, regarding the world going by. A babble of audio systems resonated from inside, broadcasting very aggressive songs in which no shortage of profane or obscene words were expressing a philosophy of hatred towards women and police officers, and a worship of drugs and guns. Several people lay in the sun on the steps staring blankly into space and making no effort to converse with each other.

We walked on looking for somewhere to sit down and rest, preferably without spending any money. There were none of the benches or parks that had been around the previous day, although more people were sitting about; but they did so on the pavement or on the steps leading up to their homes.

There suddenly erupted an outburst of noise that didn't emanate from an audio system, although it echoed the same aggressive sentiments. I couldn't see the source of the shouting until Beta prodded me and pointed several storeys up a metal fire-escape that wound perilously around the steep walls. A black ram with magnificent horns and **RAIDERS** shaved into his fleece was facing up to a group of coyotes in baseball jackets and sharp knives. There was no actual violence, but a great deal of shouting, much peppered with sexual allusion.

We hastened on down the road, past women of all species languorously

strolling along with no apparent purpose. They wore a thick coating of makeup, revealed much of their breasts, legs and genitals, and on occasion got into or emerged from the car doors of remarkably slow drivers. One car slowed down near us, and the man driving it stuck his head out of the window and yelled at Beta.

“How much, lovie? What’s your rate?”

“What do you mean?” asked Beta automatically, not slowing her stride.

“What d’you do? ‘O’ do you? D’you do ‘A’? ‘F&S’ at all?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Don’t come the old C.T. with me, lovie! I just want to know what you’re offering.”

“Nothing! Nothing at all!” gasped Beta, suddenly understanding him and grabbing my hand in a gesture of attachment. “I’m not offering anything to anyone!”

The driver sneered, and drove forward to another woman, dressed in nothing but black stockings and a woollen scarf. This woman immediately responded to his enquiries by leaning her arms on the window of the car door and negotiating with him.

“We walk with a swagger. And we walk with a grin. If there’s any flipping trouble, we’re the first ones in!” chanted some young people marching towards us carrying banners. “We Are The Illicit Boot Boys!”

The banners carried signs with such single word slogans as **Rupert**, **Truth** and **Illicit**. Some more elaborate signs depicted characters with blood streaming from recently demolished faces over such slogans as **Smash The Reds!** and **Reds May Rule But They Haven’t Won!** Their cries and shouting broke their doggerel rhythm into a chaos of shouts in which the words **Truth** and **Rupert** were most prominent. It briefly came together with the chant: “Tee. Ah. You. Tee. Aitch. We need the Truth

and the Truth needs us!”

“It’s those horrid Illicit Party people again!” Beta remarked fearfully. “But what is this about the Truth?”

I told Beta about my visit to the town of Rupert and the President Chairman’s speech where he urged the Illicit Party to seek the Truth. While I was explaining, the procession came ever closer. We stood to one side and let the march go by - partly from fascination and partly because groups of individuals were detaching themselves from the main body and harangued anyone who appeared fair game for their attention. From windows above our heads, some individuals were chanting anti-Illicit Party slogans, though it was not possible to ascertain from which political bias. This criticism earned the culprits a hail of beer cans and stones which in some cases hit their targets and smashed the windows of the rooms where the cries had come from and more often quite different ones.

Not all those observing the parade were opposed to it, however. Some cries were demonstrably in support.

“This Rupert seems rather popular with some people,” Beta commented thoughtfully.

“Illicit Worker!” shouted a large ram carrying a pile of newspapers with one held up to display the image of President Chairman Rupert underneath the banner headline: **Election Tragedy. Illicit Party Cheated of Near Victory.** “Read how the Red Party fiddled the Election. Find out how the Red Government will bring this nation to crisis.”

“No thank you,” said Beta politely.

“And why not?” challenged the ram, who had the face of the koala shaved into

his fleece and a plethora of Illicit Party buttons pinned all over. “Don’t you want to find out the truth of the Election? Don’t you want to hear how the President Chairman will lead us all to the ultimate Truth?”

“Well...,” hesitated Beta, perhaps considering the Truth. “No, not really!”

“You don’t believe all the Red propaganda do you? Only the Illicit Party can save this country. Or save the world for that matter? Only the Illicit Party has a truly radical and workable solution to the problems of the City’s budget crisis. A policy tried and tested in the Illiberal Socialist Republics. A solution which by wresting control from the factionalism of Red, Black, Blue and White and centralising it in one single non-political authority under the ideological guidance of central government would solve at a stroke the indecisiveness and waste that characterise the City. A solution which would distribute the wealth from the richer parts of the City and spread it amongst the poorer districts. Do you think the Red Government with its policy of even greater decentralisation of local government decision-making could really solve the problems that exist?”

“I don’t really know...”

“It’s all in the Illicit Worker! How Rupert will wrest control of the financial market from the chaos, anarchy and greed of the City institutions and establish a single unitarian authority. How Rupert is encouraging all supporters to pursue the Truth and how that will resolve - at a stroke - all the world’s great problems. How education will become focused like a laser beam in an overall strategy involving the cooperation of the media and the libraries. How the Religious fundamentalists, and their liberal sympathisers and apologists, who threaten to drag this nation back to the dark ages will be proscribed for the greater harmony. How abuse of sexual rights and freedoms

will be countered by a moral and ethical crusade to bring back order to the relationships between ram and ewe, billy and nanny, man and woman. How the nation will become unified into the greater glory of the Illiberal Socialist Republics, eventually to become part of the United Illiberal Socialist Empire under the President Chairman's sole authority. Aren't you interested in the Truth or Justice? Only ten guineas a copy."

"We can't afford it," I argued.

"Five guineas, then. Two guineas? Here have it for nothing!"

The ram handed us a copy and marched onto a group of crabs cowering timidly under the shadow of a large poster for hoof cleanser. Beta took the newspaper, which was printed on very thin paper and the ink of which was already splodging her hands.

She turned the pages of the Illicit Worker, while the parade finally passed by drawn up in the rear by a large mass of sheep bleating Rupert's name insistently and monotonously, with single letters of his name shaved in sequence in their fleece. This would have been more impressive had the sheep stayed in more rigid order, but they were instead proclaiming RUPRTE, THRUT and ILILCIT. The newspaper featured many illustrations of the President Chairman and rather fewer of any one else. These others looked either nondescript or rather aggressive, and were all proclaimed as either heroes or martyrs of the Illiberal Socialist cause.

Most of the articles were directed against the other political parties and had rather more to say about what was wrong with their opinions, views and manifestos than on what was right about the Illiberal Socialist Party's. It was difficult to believe that the Red Government was really advocating universal castration as part of a policy of male emasculation. The Blue Party also seemed unlikely to be quite as enthusiastic in reintroducing slavery as the paper claimed. I particularly found bizarre the notion

that the White Party was arming secret militias in the Suburbs for the planned overthrow of the state. Although there was a great deal about why the true Illicit Party supporter should join the crusade for the Truth, spearheaded in his historic speeches by the President Chairman himself, there was rather less about what it might be or where it may be found. It also seemed to gloss over what it was the Illicit Party intended to do with the Truth were it ever found.

Beta looked at the black ink that had thoroughly stained her hands. “Uuurrghh!” she gasped. “Can you look after the paper? Perhaps we can read it later somewhere.”

I nodded, took the paper, folded it up and put in my pocket. The parade was now out of sight and the street had returned to its earlier calm, leaving a debris of stones, beer cans and broken glass amongst the other litter along the kerbside.

It was at that moment I noticed the Gryphon whom I had met at the borough of Rupert hiding in the shadows of a doorway on the other side of the road. He saw me, raised his eagle eyebrows in surprise and strolled across the road towards us.

“I take it you saw that dreadful rabble of Illicit Party followers, young man,” commented the Gryphon flapping his ears vigorously. He nodded at Beta. “Hello, m’dear. I hope you don’t mind my speaking to the both of you so unIntroduced. I met your good friend at a bus station recently. I am really quite disturbed by the fanaticism and intolerance shown by these ill-bred youths. I thought behaviour like that had died out many years ago. What do you think?”

“They seem horribly violent and aggressive,” Beta commented. “I didn’t like the way they threw stones at those who disagreed with them.”

“And that’s apparently not all they do to people they take a dislike to. It may

only be hearsay of course, but I gather that they practice torture in the Illiberal Socialist Republics to get people to confess to the most outrageous crimes, that they send enormous numbers of them to die in labour camps in horrific conditions and that no opinion is legal which contradicts the wisdom of their President. Can you believe that such barbarity still exists in this day and age! And what is even worse is that young people, like those we saw passing by, want to introduce Illiberal Socialism to this country. I imagine they rather look forward to being the ones who will carry out the torture and murder.”

“The Illicit Party didn’t win the General Election, though,” I remarked.

“No. That’s something to be grateful for. Although there was little danger that they would. And I’m glad they didn’t do any better than they did: coming fifth place in the leading six parties. Now we’ve got a Red Government. Not that I voted for them. But I suppose it was inevitable they would win. And I don’t think, taking everything into account, that it’s such a bad result. As you can see, the Red Party has a lot of natural support in inner city slum areas like this. The surprise I suppose is that the Red Party didn’t poll any better than they did. I imagine too many people are wary of being governed by the likes of the people hanging around here. Don’t they look a sorry shower!”

He gestured, with his claw, at the citizenry leaning out of windows, slumping against walls or lamp-posts, or, at their most active, idly kicking the empty beer cans left behind by the Illicit Party march.

“So, young man,” speculated the Gryphon, “you have travelled on to the City. Do you expect to find the Truth here?”

“We’ll have a good look for it!” Beta said supportively.

“You too!” gasped the Gryphon. “I still think you’re wasting your time. I’m visiting the City on a short exchange visit to Oxymoron High School, just around the corner from here. It’s an enormous school compared to what I’m used to. Over fifteen hundred pupils. And not a school uniform in sight!”

“Are you a teacher?” enquired Beta, who had never needed to wear a school uniform in her native Village.

“Yes, m’dear. But it’s quite a different matter teaching here. There really isn’t any discipline. The pupils answer back and have no respect for their elders and betters. Furthermore, my colleagues have no sense of purpose or mission in the noble art of pedagogy. To them it is just a job. The worst is that the pupils are given no sense of direction. There is no emphasis on spelling, multiplication tables or Classics. What sort of adults will these children become if they can’t spell? What sort of world do these modern educationalists want where the fundamentals of education are sacrificed for freedom of expression, creativity (whatever that is!) and universal tolerance? However desirable these objectives may be, surely that is not what education is for!”

“Perhaps in parts of the City like this, there isn’t much need to spell correctly or to quote Aristophanes?” Beta suggested.

“Nonsense! However impoverished the pupils - and some of them are appallingly poor - there is always a need for a good grasp of the basics of grammar and arithmetic.”

The Gryphon brushed his beak with a claw and unruffled his wings. He gave them an impressive shake that threatened to lift him off the ground, and then let them fold again on his back.

“Are you going this way?” he asked pointing along the road in the direction we

were walking. I nodded. "Do you mind if I accompany you?"

We had no reason to object, so the three of us strolled along a road which became steadily less salubrious as we progressed. Many buildings were now in such a state of dereliction that it was astonishing they hadn't totally collapsed in on themselves. There was no shortage of people living there, behind hard plastic screens and wire fences. I was quite grateful for the Gryphon's company who made me feel much safer by virtue of his size and his ability to fight off any attack. Youths stared at us darkly from beneath rusting fire escapes and by the graffiti-adorned pillars that once supported ornate porches. The traffic had become lighter, and much of it was pulled by very haggard ungulates dragging sheets behind them which collected their droppings.

We came to a bridge by the bank of a dark brown canal which wound along the edge of the road and separated us from the backs of some forbidding red brick buildings where individuals of considerable ingenuity had succeeded in spray-painting a quite impressive density of obscure graffiti. One particular message in block letters dominated over the others, broadcasting the unpleasant message: **GOATS GO HOME! BLACKS RULE O.K.!**

"Goodness only knows where the goats are supposed to go," sniffed the Gryphon. "The City is as much their home as it is any other species. And look at the water! Have you ever seen - or smelt - anything so revolting?"

In the brown water was a shopping trolley resting on one side, a pool of green algae intermixing with oily scum and a few disconsolate ducks bobbing unhappily about on the surface. The smell was truly unpleasant. It was difficult to identify just what made it so disgusting, and it wasn't at all smothered by the floating sheets of newspaper, detergent bottles and cigarette packets on its surface. On the bank was a

motley collection of ragged and ageing citizens slumped on the filthy ground around a brazier or crouched in the dark mud. There was a swan more grey with filth than white; a sheep who had lost all its fur and festered with very raw looking sores; a collection of crabs huddled together more for company than warmth; an eryops up to its chin in slimy canal water; and a few foxes scavenging in unpromising piles of rubbish decomposing in the early morning sun.

In amongst all this squalor was a tall gentleman with a long beard, hair grown halfway down his back, wearing a long cloak and gown which despite the filth remained a sparkingly inappropriate golden tawny. He was carrying a large flask and a stack of plastic cups, which he doled out to the supplicants. He carefully poured some of the flask's contents into a cup from which rose a thin column of white steam. He also handed out bread rolls which were greedily devoured.

He saw the three of us standing, and with an apologetic comment to the sheep he had been serving, strode towards us on his sandaled feet. He smiled welcomingly at us in such an infectious manner that it was impossible not to smile in return.

"I take it that you're not poverty stricken?" he remarked amiably.

"No," smiled Beta good-humouredly, "but we certainly feel poor in the City. Everything is *so* very expensive."

"It certainly is. Especially to someone like you, who I surmise comes from the Country. But if you have nothing, then that nothing is the same if a cup of tea costs a farthing, a crown or a guinea."

"Do you belong to some kind of charitable trust?" the Gryphon wondered. "There certainly is a great need for such services in the City. It's a wonder people manage to survive at all in this filth and squalor."

“No, I don’t,” smiled the gentleman. “What I do, I do because I wish to. There are many charitable organisations in the City, as there are elsewhere in the country, and I have the highest possible regard for them. However, one’s commitment to those in need does not end at giving to others to do the task. But I fear that whatever I do makes only an insignificant contribution to alleviating the great poverty that exists here in the midst of so much plenty.” He indicated the tall buildings in the distance.

“Shouldn’t the government be doing what you’re doing?” I wondered.

“I dare say they should. The rôle of government of whatever political colour is to ameliorate the conditions of those in its charge least able to look after themselves.”

“Are you a Red, then?” asked the Gryphon. “If so, you must be pretty pleased at the results of the General Election.”

“I have no real interest or involvement in the political process. There are good people of all political and religious persuasion, and to concentrate on the virtues of one party over another is not the best way to serve the plight of the needy.”

“Surely, that’s rather naïve,” argued the Gryphon. “The Black Party and the Illicit Party don’t have very constructive attitudes towards the poor.”

“I have no opinion. What matters is the goodness and virtue of the individual. True lasting and significant change is not made solely by political policy. There are many in both the parties you mention who have good intentions, however perversely the parties they advocate may represent them.”

“I just don’t believe that political solutions have no value,” Beta objected. “Surely if the wealth of the very rich was better distributed, or if the government put more money into stimulating the economy of poor areas, or if things here weren’t so expensive ...”

“I don’t deny that,” smiled the gentleman conciliatorily. “All that you say is no doubt true. But it takes time for such political changes to take place, and it were better that they were not too firmly associated with one political persuasion over another if they are so undoubtedly for the common weal, as otherwise they risk being reversed by any future complexion of government. In the meantime, the part to be played is not to talk but to act. And action is all I know or care about. Now, if you may excuse me, I have work to do!”

With that, the gentleman returned to the mass of poor people to whom he was doling out tea and bread. We watched him for a few minutes. Beta remarked that we ought to join him, but the Gryphon vetoed the suggestion.

“I just don’t believe that we as individuals can make any appreciable change at all,” he sniffed. “At least not in this capacity. The best way I can help people is in my rôle as a teacher, not by working as a volunteer canteen assistant.”

Beta nodded reluctantly, so we left the canal and continued along the main road. The canal ran alongside it for several hundred yards, and offered the potential of quite a pleasant walk. However, the appalling potpourri of stench did not make it one now. The canal was occasionally bridged by functional iron and redbrick bridges, sometimes coated with weeds and moss.

“One would have thought that the City Council would do something about the atrocious state of the streets round here,” sniffed the Gryphon disparagingly. “They forever complain about the lack of central government funding. They say that it is set at national rates which take no account of the much greater costs in the City than elsewhere in the country. If that were true, surely the Country would be benefiting disproportionately well, considering their much lower costs.”

“Won’t things improve as a result of the General Election?” wondered Beta.

“Won’t the Red Party invest more money in areas like this?”

“I daresay they will - but there’s an enormous amount of work to do. The City Council says that if life in the City was any more attractive than it is, it would simply encourage yet more people out of the Country and condemn them to homelessness and despair in a City unable to cope with the numbers already here.”

“Quite a few people have left my Village for the City,” admitted Beta. “Like my friend Xenana. Off they go, leaving the Village short of farm workers and young people, and making it much more difficult for the rest who are left behind. They want all the things you can have in the City. And the City looks so glamorous on television. You just don’t imagine it could be as rundown as this.”

The canal came to an end, and the road became impassable to all traffic as it crowded with market stalls selling fruit and vegetables, video tapes, counterfeit goods and clothes. The Gryphon mentioned that he was near his destination, which were the local education authority offices housed in a tall concrete building protruding rather incongruously from the midst of the old and dilapidated buildings that otherwise composed the district. He hurried off, his wings flapping behind him while we negotiated the gaps between the stalls.

The air was full of the cry of market traders anxiously selling their wares. It was difficult to believe that anyone would want to buy some of the things on sell. There were worn out slippers, part used school exercise books, plastic trays and towels featuring crudely painted pictures of such City sights as Her Maphrodite’s palace and a very tall column crowned by a giant sheep. One stall sold badges, posters, magazines and books all associated with the Illicit Party. The store-holder was a young

goat with a green beret and large boots strapped to his hooves. There were quite a few customers gathered around the stall to buy badges or tee-shirts adorned by Rupert's ubiquitous face. Another stall was selling icons and religious crosses beside which was a large chimpanzee nun shouting rather insistently: "The End is Nigh! Read the Word of the Lord and Gain Salvation!"

We dodged past a camel walking by with a sandwich board advertising **Cut-Price Jeans** on either side of his hump. A large crow was selling records from a small van the sounds of which easily drowned out the calls of the market traders and shuddered through my body from my toes up.

"It's filthy here!" commented Beta, looking down at her legs now spattered with oval splashes of grime and the soles of her feet now almost totally black. "I hope we can find somewhere I can wash. I feel like such a tramp."

When we reached the other side of the market, we could see that we were now not at all far from the taller and more grand buildings of the City.

Beta sighed in relief. "I'll be so much happier to get away from all this poverty. It's *so* depressing!"

The roads were now more evenly paved and correspondingly more congested. The vehicles passing by were newer, more modern and much more powerful. We walked alongside buildings still occasionally decorated by graffiti, and Beta was pleased to see a small ornate fountain at the side of the road, where water was dripping from the minuscule penis of the statue of a small boy. We paused by the fountain for a drink of the metallic-tasting water and for Beta to wash the dirt off her filthy feet.

While she stood on one leg, leaning against a post to keep her balance, I saw the tall and unmistakable shadow of an enormous lion ambling aimlessly along the

pavement. He was far too large for the traffic and pedestrians to avoid, but both consciously tried to do so. Only a distant sense prevented him from causing severe local damage by treading on the parked cars and dislodging lamp-posts. His step seemed quite unsteady. His head was mostly bowed down. And his paws carelessly crunched up waste-paper bins and black plastic rubbish bags.

“Lord Arthur!” gasped Beta, steadying herself on both her feet. “But no sign of Una!”

Beta waved at the lion as he came closer. He didn’t appear to recognise us until he was barely yards away, and I was afraid he would tread on us and crumple us into the same twisted mess he had just left a child’s plastic tricycle. He halted in his tracks and his sad bleary eyes gazed down at us. He shook his enormous head, hitting his mane against a street lamp and shattering it into small fragments which tinkled down beside him.

“Good morning,” he said wearily and somewhat vaguely. “Hello. We meet again!”

“Hello,” greeted Beta, with some concern. “Where’s Una? Where’s the girl we saw you with yesterday?”

“Lost! Totally lost! Like everything else: lost! Never to be found again! My fortune! My empire! My life! Lost! There is nothing more for me! Nothing left for me. I am no longer the great and magnificent Lord Arthur, king of all I survey. Even my holdings in this part of the City - such paltry worthless possessions too! All lost! Gone forever! And so humiliatingly!”

“Do you know where Una’s gone?” insisted Beta.

Lord Arthur ignored her question, appearing not to even hear it. “Since the

Election, it has been as I said. In less than twenty four hours it has been disaster. Tax officials hounding me. Debts I owed from fifteen years ago return to be repaid. All my employees made redundant and on terms which leave me with nothing. Nothing! Which is what I am now! Nothing. To be sneered at by petty criminals, to be turned away from the doors of fair weather friends, to be mocked by the jackals in the media. Everywhere I turn: humiliation, defeat and insult. I am not the lion I was. I may tower high above the miserable ungulates and crustaceans of the City, but I am now no better than them. No longer wealthy. No longer powerful. A bankrupt with a legacy of debt greater than most nation's Gross National Product which will haunt me for the rest of my days. My family disown me. My colleagues disown me. I am nothing more than a pauper."

"Do you know where Una is?" persisted Beta.

"Una? The pregnant girl?" wondered Lord Arthur. "No. To be honest, I don't. I have lost everything. She is just one more thing I have lost. I should never have changed my advisors. I should never have been tempted to make quick rapid gains at the expense of core businesses and allow my business's credit to become so debased. I shouldn't have gambled away so much of my wealth. I shouldn't have frittered so much on the pursuit of worthless pleasure. My yachts, my fleet of Ferraris, my collections of priceless art, my several homes scattered all about the world. All gone!"

He opened his mouth and gave vent to a truly terrifying roar which caused several citizens to run away in fear and a car to hit into the back of another that had applied its brakes in sudden alarm. He shook his mane ferociously, smashing the glass of several windows, snapping off a flag staff jutting out of a building and bending the lamp-post he had recently damaged. His tail swung from side to side, smashing a shop

window and sending a cyclist flying sideways onto the bumper of a passing car.

“It’s over. It’s all over!” he cried in despair. “The Arthurian empire is now just a legend. One that I trust will always be remembered. One that will not be judged to harshly by history, I hope. To join the procession of great businesses which have preceded it. Now to be plundered by the Red Party vultures, the gangsters of organised crime and the banks. Perhaps as people look upon my great works they will not feel that it has all been in vain. It has had its great moments. I may have been guilty of great crimes and malpractices in my years as a tycoon. I may have become famous as much for my vices and my readiness to sue for libel as for my fabulous wealth and the comfortable working conditions of my City employees. Time will tell. Only time will tell!”

Then, without even the hint of a farewell, he continued on his lumbering confused way in the direction of the market we had left, muttering to himself and occasionally shouting an incoherent cry of rage and frustration.

16

Perhaps it was because the buildings were no longer so rundown. Perhaps it was because cars were diverted from the pedestrian walkways. Perhaps it was the general atmosphere of festivity generated by the flashing neon lights and holographic posters. Whatever it was we felt much more comfortable walking in the district we were now in, despite it being much more crowded. There were theatres on all sides: old buildings much more ornate in their design than the magnificent tall ones in the financial district, but largely obscured by hoardings, flashing lights and critical acclaim couched in quotation marks and qualified by the name of a national newspaper. **"Truly Breathtaking!" "A Magnificent Achievement!" "You need a full box of hankies for this one!"** All such praise showered on plays with names like **The Butler's Underpants, Venezuela!** and **The Brothers Karazomov**. There were cinemas in similar buildings framed by a necklace of neon with bold letters and enormous posters for films for which this was the 'World Première', or which had already grossed trillions of guineas, or which starred hugely famous people or their close relatives. There were films with titles like **The Lion, The Goat and the Wardrobe, Candy's Butt, Death Vomit XVI** and **Turd Sensation** (A Musical Adaptation of the work of De Sade).

There were classical plays, children's cartoons, grand opera, ballet, experimental theatre, pornography, silent movies and musical comedies. The choice was as truly impressive as the prices to actually view any of these productions. Sixty

guineas to see a film and nearly two thousand guineas for a seat in the opera house. We could not afford to see any of them. In any case, it was still not midday and most theatres and cinemas hadn't yet opened for business, although the booking offices were invitingly so.

We sat on a bench in a paved square. We had been walking all morning, and Beta was eager to rest the pavement-hardened soles of her bare feet. Cinemas and theatres ringed us on all sides, interspersed with cafés, games arcades, Virtual Reality emporia and shops selling such tourist goods as top hats with **I © The City** written on them, fluffy toys modelled on Her Maphrodite and postcards featuring the many sights of the City.

"Where do we go now?" wondered Beta. "Wherever it is, I hope we can find something to eat. I'm still very hungry."

I nodded, and looked sadly down at my feet. Our time in the City had not been particularly productive with regard to finding the Truth. I pondered the wisdom of having come somewhere so large and expensive, and especially of having brought Beta along. She had undoubtedly made my time in the City much more pleasant than it might have been otherwise. She was good company and the more I saw of her the more attractive she became. I was losing my self-consciousness of being accompanied by a naked woman - but in the City there was so much variety and weirdness that Beta and I were equally unremarkable. As much so as the lion chatting amiably with a lamb at the entrance to Her Maphrodite's Royal Theatre. Or the goat singing sea shanties, a cap laid down for passers-by to leave money, in front of the statue of a celebrated thespian. Or the flashing holographic image of an ankylosaurus dancing with an eland above a baroque building where a ballet was being performed.

Or, indeed, the sight of a woman striding towards us in a voluminous green and golden dress, a corseted waist, long brown hair pulled up into a massive bun and secured by a massive golden hairpin, and a very revealing cleavage. She was waving her arm enthusiastically and cheerfully. I recognised her as the Actress whom I'd met on the bus to Lambdeth. She greeted us both. I returned her greeting while Beta looked up shyly.

"Golly gosh! Fancy meeting you here! I thought you were visiting Lambdeth and here you are in the City! And with your *beautiful* girlfriend. Hello, there! What's your name?"

"It's Beta. And I'm not his girlfriend! We're just friends."

"Well, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. Still I jolly well expect a girl as pretty as you must have an awful lot of boyfriends, mustn't you? There can't be a man in this world who wouldn't find you terribly attractive."

Beta was plainly disconcerted by the Actress's directness. "I don't know about that. Anyway, I don't have a boyfriend. I'm a virgin."

"A virgin!" exclaimed the Actress with genuine astonishment. "I've heard of those. I thought they were virtually extinct."

"Well, I'm one. And I don't think it's anything to be ashamed of!"

The Actress sensed that her manner didn't accord with Beta and frowned. "Whatever you think, Beta dear. Standards of behaviour vary *so* much, don't they? Anyway, you don't mind if I sit down. These shoes are absolutely killing me!"

She lowered herself on to the bench beside Beta. Her dress bloused out to reveal an assortment of under-dresses, slips, garters and the shoes which had inflicted her with pain. They were brilliant white and very tight with square heels and toes, and

adorned with golden buckles.

“So, what do you think of the Election result? Flipping wonderful, isn’t it! I was terrified the blooming Blues would win or even the Whites, but, as it is, the Reds have triumphed. A Red Government! No more Coition nonsense. No more of a government noted for noise, sweat and activity, but productive of absolutely no results of any flipping use to anyone. My comrades and I celebrated *all* night flipping long! Did you two celebrate? Or did you vote for some other party?”

“We didn’t vote at all,” I admitted, “and although we were out at a night club in the evening we weren’t really celebrating anything.”

“Is that because you wanted the Whites or the Greens to win? Don’t worry, I can accept that not everyone supposes a Red Government is necessarily good - but I tell you: you’ll soon realise how much you’ve been deceived by all the Black, Blue and Illicit propaganda.”

“I didn’t particularly mind the Red Party winning,” Beta elaborated. “They may even be the best choice for me and my Village. But there’s *so* much violence their victory’s caused. We witnessed a fight at the night club between supporters of the Black and Illicit Parties. They virtually destroyed the place. They assaulted innocent people, like this penguin we were talking to ...”

“I *hate* the Black Party! And I *hate* the Illicit Party! They’re not political parties either of them. They’re nothing more than excuses for thuggery. And heaven help us if they ever gain power! The Black Party would repatriate everyone with a foreign surname. They would exterminate the Cats, the goats and most sheep. They would declare war on all our neighbours. They would ban trades unions, imprison my comrades in the Red Party and probably the Green Party as well, and ban any literature

they didn't approve of. Modern art, modern theatre and modern architecture would be totally repressed. All that would be left would be a flipping parody of a Grecian Utopia with slavery, tyranny, warfare and universal intolerance. People like me and probably both of you would be deemed unacceptable and would face the stark choice of a firing squad or deportation. If the bastards were ever that flipping considerate!"

The Actress paused, overwhelmed by her tirade, and scanned the square with a broad grin. "This is home from home to me," she declared. "The bright lights of the theatre and cinema. Such excitement and so much to see."

"Are you performing in a production at the moment?" I asked.

"Indeed, I am," the Actress replied. "I am that most envied of things: an actress who is hardly ever out of work. I have my agent to thank for that, and some astute rôle choices in the past. I can't complain that I am not proud of all the rôles I've played. An actress must compromise to make a living. I may never have been a leading star. My name may not yet be one of those highest in the billings. But my name has been in lights. And it has been on posters in every underground station in the City. I'm currently appearing in **The Lion of Naples** at the Royal Court Theatre."

"What's that about?" I wondered.

"It's a sixteenth century play set in Naples where everyone plots against everyone else and everyone gets killed in the end. It's a classic of its sort. It's been updated a bit for the modern audience, of course. The violence is more graphic, the sex is more explicit, there is a great deal of nudity and it is staged in modern dress. But I'm told it remains very faithful in spirit to the original. There is an attempt to give it modern relevance by casting the lords and ladies who do most of the killing and plotting as members of the Blue Party, and the clowns are cast as comrades of the Red

Party. My own rôle is the Lady Pudenda: a double-crossing, hypocritical member of the aristocracy who is poisoned in the fourth act. You ought to see it.”

“I don’t think we can afford to,” remarked Beta.

The Actress nodded sympathetically. “No, I suppose in all honesty you couldn’t. It’s a shame really. It’s a stirring production and got excellent reviews in **Time Off**, **The New Statesperson** and **The Lion Hunter’s Quarterly Review**.” She looked around her at all the productions there were on. “It is indeed a shame to be in the cultural heart of the City, and not able to afford to see anything. There’s **My Pyjama Cord Is Missing**, a farce in which there are many hairy bare knees, innumerable improbable coincidences and a starring rôle for Henry the Bisexual Sheep. Then there’s the play, **The Black Death**, a savage attack on the racist, sexist and militaristic policies of the Black Party staged by The Red Flag Theatre Company in which the cast wear cardboard boxes on their head and carry bicycle pumps instead of guns. Or you could see **Bedtime Blues**, a musical based on **Le Recherché de Temps Perdu**, noted for its athletic dancing and catchy songs.”

“It all sounds fascinating,” admitted Beta.

“Or there are the films. **The Blood of Uranus**, a science fiction film made on a very small budget where the aliens are sheep dressed in black plastic bags and the space ship resembles a fountain pen attached to a firework. **Come Dancing**, an erotic drama noted for both its sexual explicitness and the incredible skill the cast demonstrate in remembering their lines. Or there’s the current film by the famous director, Anthony Schwarzhof, which combines a roller-coaster of non-stop action and special effects with a poignant social message regarding the dreadful state of housing

in the City and reflections on nihilism: **Nothing Doing!** Or perhaps opera or ballet is your taste? There's everything here, and no reason to ever be bored."

"I just don't think we feel up to seeing a play or film," Beta remarked. "We're both very tired. We had to sleep in an alley-way last night and we've been walking all morning."

"Oh! You poor things!" exclaimed the Actress. "I had no jolly idea! You need somewhere to sit and relax. Look! I'll take you to a nearby pub and I'll buy you both a drink. What do you think?"

"You're very kind, but I don't really think ..." began Beta.

"Don't make excuses! I insist! I want to prove that not everyone in the City is unwelcoming! Come on, let's go. The Half Man is very congenial."

We were about to respond to the Actress's offer when we were distracted by shouting and yelling from a corner of the square. A group of people, including a few aggressive rams, charged into the square waving banners portraying Chairman President Rupert pursued by baton-wielding police. Some threw sticks and stones at shop windows and cinemas, and pushed into those unwary pedestrians who hadn't already prudently dispersed. Some threw beer cans and stones at the police who protected their faces with their arms and pushed forward as best they could against the onslaught. It was certainly no longer safe to stay where we were.

The Actress sprung up onto her feet. "Come on! Run! It looks *jolly* dangerous."

As if to underscore her words, a beer can arched through the sky towards us and clattered to the ground just yards away. Beta and I ran with the Actress out of the square, as more and more police and Illicit Party supporters flooded in. Barricades

were already being constructed from overturned benches, security fences and motor scooters. A large horse cantered past neighing Rupert's name over and over again.

We dashed down the nearest road along with tourists and others chattering excitedly as they fled. The Actress made certain that we remained within sight of her, which was not at all easy in the general crush. Any humour in the retreat was abruptly shattered by the loud smash of a plate glass window by an excitable ram who was wilfully battering his head into it. Fragments of glass showered in our direction. "Kill the Reds!" "Red Party Out. Out. Out. Rupert In. In. In." came chants and cries from behind.

The Actress hastened us along narrow passageways, past small cinemas showing films like **Anal Intrigue**, **Piss On Me** and **The Fists of Fu Manchu**. We sprinted past crowded pubs, cafés and book shops, and then through the doorway of a tall building proclaimed by huge letters as **THE HALF MAN**. We dashed up a flight of carpeted steps to pause, panting and gasping, at the doors of two elevators.

"This is the way to the pub!" the Actress announced, through the gasps of her shortened breath. "We should be perfectly safe up there. What was going on, do you think?"

"Illicit Party people," gasped Beta. "We saw some this morning in a different part of the City. They were causing trouble there as well."

"Trouble! That sounds like them. All they want is to cause trouble. I guess they just want to destabilise the new Red Government. I hate the bastards. As bad as the Black Party - only without an ideology. Well, here's the lift. Let's get in!"

The velvet padded elevator shot up from the ground floor, the neon numbers of

the display rapidly ascending in sequence. "It's a nice pub. Quite famous," advertised the Actress. "Good strong beer and plenty of it. The food's quite good as well if you fancy some. Don't worry, I'll treat you!"

Beta was reluctant to accept favours from a woman whose remarks about virginity she was still smarting from, but she had lost the spirit to reject the offer. "We're very hungry," she admitted.

The escalator opened onto a commodious red velvet lounge in which there was a large oak bar lining one wall and already quite a few customers. The Actress selected some seats by the window and dashed off to the bar. While she was away, Beta and I looked down at the City below. We were a tremendous height above the streets. The lift indicator had reached the number 162 when the lift had at last arrived. There were some buildings of about the same height or higher towering over others, many concentrated together in what we assumed to be the financial district. Cars drove by in a snake-like procession of ant-sized congestion. The sun was high in the sky and cast very short shadows onto the traffic. A small helicopter passed above, and below there was a swirling of hippogriffs and pterosaurs. Several blocks away a large gorilla carrying an enormous plastic shopping bag was clambering up a building.

The Actress returned with three pints of cider on a tray and a matching number of menus. "Jolly splendid view, isn't it! The City seems so much more manageable when it's seen on such a small scale. Now, here's the selection of food. Don't worry about the cost. Money's no object to me: I get paid very well. I'd recommend the lamb and they do a lion-sized mixed grill. I hope you like cider. I'll warn you: it's quite strong."

She sat down and extracted a silver cigarette case from a small handbag hidden

amongst the folds of her enormous dress. She selected a very fat cigarette which she lit with a petrol lighter, and grinned as it issued a rich sweet-smelling odour. She inhaled very deeply, expressing slight startlement as it triggered a response in her.

Beta and I spent several minutes reading the menu and making our choice; something becoming progressively difficult after a few sips of the cider and a few inhalations of the Actress's rich tasting cigarette. When we'd made our decision, the Actress attracted the attention of a lioness waitress who was hovering about the pub in a pinafore and hat and taking customer's orders.

While the Actress spoke to the lioness, a rather loud bang suddenly erupted from outside. It was far too loud to be attributed to a car engine backfiring, and immediately drew the clientele to rush like moths against the window. Beta and I gazed down at a column of smoke rising from behind some smaller buildings in the middle distance. For a moment, we could assume that its source was a bonfire, but then the air was pierced by the clamour of alarms as ambulances, police cars and fire engines descended on the scene from all directions. It was fascinating to watch the traffic part to let these vehicles squeeze by. I pointed this out to Beta. "It's the fastest way to get through the City, I think!"

Beta frowned. "How can you joke like that? If there are ambulances then someone must have been hurt. Or even killed!"

"Beta's right," remarked the Actress thoughtfully. "If we can see so much smoke from up here, then it must have been a very large explosion. It's probably destroyed a building or at least damaged it pretty badly. It might be a car explosion. Or perhaps something left in a wastepaper bin. I can't be sure, but I'd be surprised if it were a coincidence that the General Election brought the Reds to power and that so

many Illicit Party people are running amok in the City. I reckon it's the flipping Illicitists who've done that. So much for their flipping commitment to democracy!"

The lioness waitress stood to one side of us. "I think that might be Lambdeth Square, where the theatres are. There won't be many plays on this evening if it is!"

"I certainly hope it isn't!" exclaimed the Actress, inhaling deeply on the thick stub of her cigarette. "I'm supposed to be on tonight!" She sat down pensively in her chair behind which was the picture of the Half Man after which the pub was named: the rear view of half a man whose open chest was packed with revellers.

We sat beside her as a fleet of small helicopters and winged monkeys flew past the building towards the source of the smoke.

"I hate the Illicit Party," restated the Actress. "What do you think, Beta dear?"

"They're not well-known in the Village," Beta admitted. "They're a very new political party aren't they?"

"And getting frighteningly popular in some sections, I'm afraid. They scare me. This Rupert might look jolly harmless, but then nobody would suspect a flipping koala of being a tyrannical despot. I think his bite is actually worse than his bark. Some of the reports coming from the Illiberal Socialist Republics are jolly distressing. Socialists and sympathisers tortured and assassinated. Trades Unionists jailed or murdered. Freedom of speech and expression totally banned. It'd be flipping dreadful if this country were to ever get like that. I just hope the trouncing that lot got in the General Election will be enough to kill the party off."

"Why are they so upset about the Red Party winning the election that they'd riot and blow things up?" wondered Beta, as the waitress arrived with her order of vegetarian cottage pie, turnips and swede.

The Actress smiled at the waitress as her own order of lamb chops, roast potato and green salad was placed on the table in front of her. "I'm sure it's not the Red Party as such they object to, but it's a jolly convenient excuse to use all the generations of propaganda levelled by the wealthy and influential against them. They wouldn't have such an easy target, I suppose, if the Blues or the Whites had won. They just want to cause trouble. That's all. Disruption for its own sake!"

"What is it that people object to about the Red Party?" I wondered.

"Loss of vested interests, basically. The Red Party is concerned with fairness, equality and justice. It doesn't want to see some people so much better off than others and others so poor. It's wrong that some starve and others have too much. What the Red Party intends to do is stimulate the economy by creating jobs, increasing the relative wealth of the poor and giving everyone an equal chance in life. The Red Government will give this country the direction and purposiveness that has been squandered by years of blooming Coition misrule."

"I take it you're a supporter of the Red Party?" Beta remarked.

"Fully paid up and have been for as many years as I can remember!" the Actress boasted.

"Does that mean you're a socialist?" I asked, chewing on a sausage from my sizeable mixed grill.

"And jolly proud of it! I've been a socialist from as soon as I was old enough to tell the difference between good and evil."

The Actress finished her meal and emptied her glass in a few rapid gulps. She glanced at her wallet, pulled out a five hundred guinea note and without a word strode across to the bar where she paid the bar steward, a lion in a smart black suit and bow-

tie. She chatted with him while Beta and I sated the rest of our appetite and sipped on the strong cider. The food, drink and smoke made me feel quite light-headed. I also felt very comfortable sitting on the velvet seat next to Beta, who was pushing the last of the mashed swede onto her fork, and raised it to her mouth. I was very pleased with Beta's company and gratefully contemplated her beauty.

The Actress wandered back with a broad smile. "Well, I must be on my way. I have rehearsals to attend. You don't have to come with me. Rest here as long as you like!" In truth, we were too relaxed to follow her, so we nodded at her amiably as she meandered over to the pair of elevators past the ornamental palm, the statues of Greek goddesses and a display of colourful gladioli.

17

Reaching out ahead of me, I picked up the glass of cider, lifted it to my mouth and sipped it while contemplating Beta who was clasping her glass in front of her breasts. I was indeed very fortunate to be with a woman so truly beautiful, I mused, boldly resting my arm over her bare shoulders. I was delighted that she didn't resist my approach and indeed returned the affection by placing a hand on my thigh. She gazed up at me and smiled: "It's so nice to be off the City streets. I couldn't bear to live here. It's so noisy. So polluted. And ever so busy. I can't believe we'll ever find the Truth here. We should leave the City and search elsewhere."

I nodded, restoring the glass to the table. "We haven't seen anything here that even resembles the Truth," I admitted. "The City may have everything else, and it seems to have it in abundance. But you're right. The Truth must be somewhere else."

Beta pointed at my nearly empty glass. "Don't hurry your drink! I like sitting here, high above the City and on these comfortable seats. It's so much more relaxing."

The atmosphere was certainly that, as much a result of what we'd consumed as in anything inherent to the environment. A group of baboons excitedly debated politics opposite us. A spider monkey was leaning on the bar and talking to the bar steward: a lion dressed in a tuxedo who was cleaning the inside of a pint glass with a small towel. A group of australopithecines was playing darts in the far corner. And standing at the bar, looming high above everyone, was a very tall figure in a long green overcoat carrying a tri-cornered hat in his enormous paws. His bright button eyes scanned the bar while he waited to be served.

He saw Beta and me, and broke away, still clutching the hundred guinea note he had been gesturing idly towards nobody in particular. He lumbered past the baboons, slightly brushing against an especially aggressive one who might have challenged the teddy bear had he not been so enormous.

“Why hello, young man! And with a young lady. Your wife, perchance?”

“No!” disclaimed Beta, snapping her hand from my lap. “We’re just friends.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have made such a brash presumption. Well good afternoon, young lady. My name is Hubert. I met your friend a few days ago at the castle of a friend of mine...”

“Do you mean Tudor?” asked Beta, recalling my account of the occasion.

“Yes, I’ve known Tudor for a long time. He’s a frequent visitor to my Village. My name is Beta.”

She leaned forward, requiring me to reluctantly withdraw my arm from her shoulders and shook what she could of his columnar paw.

“I was just buying myself a drink. I’ll buy you some too, if you like. What are you having? Cider, isn’t it?”

Then, before either of us could protest that one pint of the potent brew was sufficiently intoxicating, he lumbered back to the bar and this time the bar steward served him quite promptly. Hubert returned followed by the lion carrying a tray of drinks which his paws were ill-equipped to manage. The lion thoughtfully fetched a particularly large sofa in which the teddy bear could sit in relative comfort, and then returned to his conversation with the spider monkey, who was rolling a cigarette on the bar surface.

“So!” remarked Hubert after imbibing a long draught of cider. “Like me, your

quest has brought you to the City. Unfortunately, I am having little success in my search for relics of the Great Bard. I trust your endeavour is proceeding more profitably? Is your friend accompanying you?"

"Yes, I am," Beta affirmed. "We've not been any more successful than you. We seem to do nothing but wander the streets and get horribly lost."

"Isn't that always the way? The feet get very sore, but if the end is honourable then it must all be worthwhile. As they say, it is the travelling, not the arriving, which makes the journey. Yesterday, I spent many happy hours in the City Library reading the original texts the Great Bard has left. He was greatly influenced by mysticism. He attached great significance to prime numbers, like seventeen, seven and one. He believed them to be symbolic of great truths as they are irreducible but become the basis of all other numbers. Much of his poetry revels in the fundamental properties of number and what it reveals of the world. It should be remembered that in his era there was little thought or knowledge of fractal geometry, curved space or different degrees of infinity. Just imagine what he would do now with concepts like the Gödel Number, the catastrophe theory or the Mandelbrot Set. How that would have inspired him!"

I sipped at the cider and allowed my arm to once again lie unresisted over Beta's shoulders.

"Was it only numbers which inspired him?" she asked.

"He was also excited by concepts of circularity and cyclical behaviour. He often compared life to the sine wave or the sphere. He claimed that life has neither beginning nor end. One is merely the prelude to the other. He was also fascinated by such concepts as the twelve houses of the heavens and the twelve cycles within twelve of the Chinese calendar. He believed that all patterns revealed the basic meaning of life,

and often modelled his poetry on exact rhythms and structures borrowed from numerology, astrology, the **I Ching**, the Tarot and the harmonic scale. To study the Great Bard is to learn much not normally associated with poetry.”

Hubert was drinking his cider very rapidly which was appropriate for such a large individual. We had barely drunk down an inch of our glasses when his was emptied. He wiped his mouth with the back of his paw.

“Zounds! That was a drink I needed. Much as I enjoy being in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the City, I much prefer the Country where the air is fresh and where people have more time for company.”

He stood up and looked down at the City below where a wisp of smoke was still rising from the site of the recent explosion.

“I shall be leaving the City tomorrow morning, but I have a number of things to do this afternoon. However, it has been charming to meet the two of you. Give my regards to Tudor should you see him.”

With that, the teddy bear lumbered out of the bar and into the lift which was only just large enough to accommodate him and a pair of macaques shadowed by his enormous great coat.

“That was certainly brief!” remarked Beta. “But Hubert’s quest must be inspiration to us.”

“Indeed,” I agreed, squeezing Beta’s shoulder and finding comfort in just sitting so close to her.

We relaxed together for a while, drinking our ciders and watching the company in the bar. Not a great deal was happening. A chimpanzee had joined the spider monkey and the bar steward, and was gesticulating wildly about something that had

excited him, his long arms stretched high above his head. A group of ring-tailed lemurs was playing a noisy game of dominoes in a far corner, watched by a pair of tarsiers. A television beamed soundless images of fighting and violence probably taking place in the City. A juke box was playing loud percussive electronic music, punctuated by what sounded very much like religious chants.

The alcohol had a pronounced effect on my bladder as well as on my mind, and I soon felt the need to relieve myself. I drank the last of the cider, and lifted myself up. It was only when I was on my feet, I became aware of just how much I had been affected. Everything was disorientated and I was feeling distinctly unsteady.

“I’ll just go to the loo,” I heard myself say.

“I must go too,” Beta said, drinking most of what she had left and wobbled uncertainly to her feet. I supported her with a hand as she nearly stumbled over a step. We made our way in the direction signposted **Toilets** across a floor that seemed much more extensive than it did when we’d arrived and through a door that led down an interminable corridor through fire door after fire door, leading to metal plaques adorned by silhouetted figures which made clear which further series of doors was intended for me and which for Beta.

After relieving myself, I studied the reflection in the mirror of someone I barely recognised. It was almost a shock to see myself as others might see me, and I wasn’t sure I particularly liked the sight. I blinked and shook my head in the hope that my reflection might improve, but it remained much the same. I shrugged my shoulders and stumbled out into the corridor where Beta was waiting for me.

“Let’s get going!” she said adamantly, pushing open a fire-door that led into a corridor which looked exactly like the one we’d come from, but I couldn’t be exactly

sure through the haze in my mind. Beta however pushed ahead, and I followed her past rows of fire-extinguishers and elegant portraits.

“I’m sure it didn’t take as long as this to get to the lavatory!” I remarked, a little puzzled.

“I think you may be right,” agreed Beta, pushing open a door to the side marked quite clearly **PRIVATE**, but which she seemed to think for some reason was exactly the right door to venture through. On the other side was a tall escalator leading upwards where a window of sunlight shone brightly on the uppermost steps. “Does that lead to the roof, do you think?”

“It certainly looks like it,” I commented. “A strange place to have an escalator, though.”

“Shall we go up?” giggled Beta adventurously. “I wonder what the view’s like from the very top of this building.”

“I wonder,” I agreed, alcohol-emboldened. “Shall we find out?”

Beta giggled again, and placed her foot on the lowest step of the escalator, which suddenly jerked into life on detecting her presence and began moving upwards. I trod onto the step behind her and boldly held her round the waist as we ascended and the window of sunlight came steadily closer. I could smell Beta’s hair under my nose and felt it dropping down over my arms and to below her waist. I squeezed her waist slightly, and she turned her head round and grinned welcomingly.

The sun flooded down from a sunny blue sky, accompanied by smells of flowers, grass and fresh air. Towards the top, we squinted in a bright beam of light speckled with hovering specks of seed. From above we could hear the chorus of song birds and the occasional squawk of a peacock. There was also the distinct splash of

falling water and the rustle of a breeze through the broad leaves of the spreading trees. As we surfaced, we discovered ourselves in a magnificent garden of water-falls, springs, fruit trees and grass. A lion was sipping at a pond-side beside a tiny fawn. A delicate gazelle gambolled joyfully near a large rose bush. A pachybelodon was scooping up weeds from one end of the pond. Several birds of paradise flew across from tree to tree, watched on by colourful howler monkeys and marmosets. We stepped off the top of the escalator - which stopped the moment we were no longer on it - and looked around us with amazement.

“I certainly didn’t expect to find anything like this at the top of the Half Man!” Beta exclaimed, wandering through the long uncut grass, her hands idly pulling off clouds of seed from dandelions.

The top of the escalator from which we had emerged now appeared more like a hole in the ground and the City very distant indeed. Instead of the roar of traffic, the air resounded with the sounds of joyous living. I wondered where the garden might end. It appeared to stretch interminably in all directions, or at least as far as the odd trees and pagodas that were scattered about. None of this disturbed me at all. The effects of drink, I imagined. I glanced around to find Beta, but I couldn’t see her at all.

“Beta! Beta!” I called out, disturbing a toucan that crashed out of a tree. “Where are you?”

“Here! Over here!” she called, hidden behind some trees.

I chased around them only to see her run off towards a gazebo beneath a tall beech. I ran after her as she dodged behind it. When I got there, she immediately started running again, laughing childishly, her long hair flowing behind her and her naked body not at all out of place in the luxuriance of the grass and the heat of the sun.

For several minutes we chased after each other between the trees and bushes, around the ornate ponds and the buzz of caddis-flies, past the waterfalls, behind the pillars of curiously neglected ornamental buildings and knee-high through wild grasses. I was much more unfit than Beta who was much more accustomed to the outdoor life, and was soon short of breath and sweating profusely in the bright midday sun.

“It’s beautiful here!” exclaimed Beta, strolling up to me as I panted and wheezed in the shadow of a tall apple tree. “You wouldn’t believe that there was anywhere like this in the City.”

I nodded, slowly recovering from my exertions. “It’s a lovely garden.”

“My! You *are* hot!” commented Beta, stepping up closer and feeling my forehead with the back of her hand. She started to unbutton my clothes. “You certainly don’t need these things in this heat. I don’t know *why* you have to wear them all the time.”

Her hands carefully unbuttoned, unclasped and unzipped me, smiling at me in a very inviting and mischievous way. I stretched my arms out, took Beta by the shoulder and pulled her unprotesting body close to my breast and her face up to mine. My chest was bared to the sun and I pushed off my shoes and trousers from about my ankles with clumsy motions of my feet.

“You’re *very* hot!” repeated Beta with wonder, as I pulled her face towards mine, my tongue entered her mouth, one hand grasped her back beneath her long green hair and the other lower down about her buttocks. I kissed her in a spurt of action and excitement which Beta more than reciprocated. She momentarily pushed me off and examined me with a face illuminated by passion and shrouded by loose strands of her long hair.

“I’m a virgin, you know,” she whispered unnecessarily and plunged her tongue back into my mouth, pulling my underpants down to my knees with a decisive tug and grasping the back of my neck with a free hand.

Beta’s body wholly engulfed my senses: her smell, her taste, the warmth and softness of her skin. Her gasps and my own drowned out the sounds of chorusing doves, chirping frogs and rustling leaves. Only the warm breeze on my naked back and the stab of blades of long grass as we descended to the ground in a close huddle of flesh and motion served to remind me where we were and that the world consisted of other things beside Beta, her unresisting body and her tender caresses.

I don’t know how long we were together, lost in passion and lost to the world, but eventually our senses reawakened. We lay together, naked in the grass, my clothes scattered about widely and loosely, our arms around each other, viscous liquids clinging to the hair of our legs and the top of our thighs, and the sun blazing down on us with supreme indifference. A magpie clucked in the tree above us, a small lizard dashed behind a rock and in the distance we could hear the chortle and chatter of gibbons. I pulled Beta forward and gave her a shy but tender kiss on the lips.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

Beta looked down ruefully at her pubic hair and extracted a long blade of grass.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Different, I suppose. Just different!” She leaned over and pulled me towards her. “Why *do* you people from the Suburbs and Lambdeth wear clothes? It’s not just to keep yourself warm, is it? You look so much more natural as you are.”

I smiled, unable to explain why, even now, I felt a great desire to climb back into the clothes I’d discarded. It somehow seemed inappropriate to remain naked, now

that I was steadily sobering and our lovemaking was over. I gazed longingly around me, trying to discover my underpants, when I noticed a sandaled foot in the grass and above it a long tall golden gown. I hurriedly and embarrassedly covered my genitals with my hands and prodded Beta. We raised our heads towards the owner of the sandals.

It was the bearded gentleman we had met earlier that morning serving food to the wretches by the canal. That place seemed so remote here in the garden. What could he be doing here? He still had an infectious welcoming smile, but he spoke to us with a seriousness that belied his apparent joviality.

“What may I ask are you doing here? Are you aware that you are trespassing?”

I jumped to my feet ensuring that my hand covered my crotch. “We didn’t expect there to be a garden here. We got lost on the way back from the toilet and found our way here by mistake. We didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

Beta stood up as well, far less abashed about her nudity. “It’s very beautiful here. It’s probably the loveliest place I’ve ever been to. Surely you aren’t surprised that we should want to come here and enjoy ourselves.”

“Enjoying yourselves in the delights of nature in more ways than one, I should think. But less of this. You may be trespassers and in my capacity as gardener I may have to advise you to leave by the way you came, but at the same time I must also extend my welcome to you. You must realise, however, that this garden is not meant for the curious tourist.”

“It’s in a very strange place,” Beta remarked. “Right at the top of a skyscraper, a few floors above a pub. How can a garden like this be here?”

“It just is,” the gentleman remarked folding his arms. “I’m glad however that

you are so appreciative. I work hard to tend this garden. It's not as easy as you would think. It has to be both natural and tamed. It has to be beautiful and slightly wild without becoming unmanageable and disorganised. Fortunately, nature does most of the work for me. I merely prod it in the direction I wish it to go. Isn't nature a wonderful thing?"

"Indeed it is!" agreed Beta, admiring the landscape. "It's ravishing. It must be wonderful to work here!"

"That I can't deny," the gentleman assented nodding at a tree shrew that had leapt onto his shoulder and gazed up at him quizzically. "There can be no other occupation more rewarding."

"And you also give alms to the poor," I reminded him.

"Indeed, I do. It is but small duty. It gives me as much joy to give to those in need as it does to tend the growing flowers, the young lamb, the mischievous lion-cub and all the others in the garden." He looked up at the sky with a wistful expression, a gust slightly lifting up his long hair, and sighed. "If only everything in the world were like this. But it cannot and should not be. All I can do is tend the small corner of it to which I have access."

"Who owns the garden?" I wondered.

Beta put an arm around my waist while the gentleman answered. "The same person who owns the Half Man and the rest of the building from which you emerged. He's quite a recluse. Although I've worked here many years I don't think I have had the pleasure of meeting him once, though his memos specify exactly what he wants done. All I know of him is the print of his word processor and the wax seal he attaches to it. But I don't worry too much about questions like this. Why should I ever need to

meet him and what would I do if I did?"

"We're in the City searching for the Truth," Beta explained. "If there's anywhere in the City where the Truth can be found surely it would be here in amongst all this beauty and plenty. If there's such a place as paradise, this much surely be it. Do you think we'll be find it here?"

The gardener laughed indulgently. "The Truth? Here! Goodness, no! This may seem like paradise, but you won't find the Truth here. Or at least if it is here, I've never come across it."

"Do you know what the Truth might be?" I wondered.

"If I knew that, I would tell you. Like many people I have my ideas, but they are mere speculation. I'm sure that the Truth does exist. There must be some fundamental kernel of truth and reality in the Universe, and if it is called the Truth, so be it. Underneath the vicissitudes of perception and prejudice there is a core to being which when found must be incontrovertible and just right. However, what can this Truth be? It has to be something which is true at the very smallest distances, less than the width of a quantum particle where velocity, position and direction are totally uncertain, to the very reaches of infinite time and space where our meagre existence seems so immensely trivial. It has to be something which goes beyond the illusions of the senses and also constitutes the ethics, aesthetics and purposiveness which are so important to all sentient beings. It must contain all that exists and at the same time be a total abstraction of them. Yes, there must be a Truth, but I don't know what it is. I am indeed flattered that you might imagine that something as beautiful as this garden might be the Truth - but please don't confuse the pleasant and desirable with the Truth. I fear that it may not be as agreeable as you would like it to be!"

“So the Truth isn’t here!” sighed Beta. “That means that if we want to find it, we’ll have to leave.”

The gardener smiled sternly. “I’m afraid you will have to leave the garden anyway, whether the Truth were here or not. However much you may wish to stay, you are not at liberty to do so. I hope you have success in your endeavour, but it is not one I would wish to pursue.”

“Why not?” I wondered.

“I really don’t believe that knowledge of the Truth is either desirable or necessary. There is no need of a grand scheme for people to know that they should treat each other with justice, fairness and kindness. More is to be gained by acting to change things for the better in whatever humble capacity one can than by searching for something whose discovery will probably cause more conflict than it resolves and disappoint rather more people than it will please. With so many disparate opinions of what the Truth must be, held with such adamant conviction by so many, its discovery is unlikely to be universally acclaimed.”

“Are you advising us to abandon our search?” Beta asked sadly.

“Not at all! I am merely expressing why I would not pursue it. However, I would advise you to leave the City and direct your search towards the Suburbs.”

“The Suburbs?” I asked, flabbergasted. “Is the Truth in the Suburbs ...?”

“...and not in this garden?” echoed Beta.

“I don’t know where the Truth is. That is not the advice I am giving. All I know is that the search for the Truth initiated by President Chairman Rupert and followed now by very many of his supporters, and many others who are not, is directed towards the Suburbs. I don’t know why. It may be that there is a perverseness in the

Illicit Party which attributes the Truth to the least likely of places. Or it could be that it is indeed there. That it is for you to find out. And by going to the Suburbs you would at least eliminate one possibility.”

“The Suburbs!” I exclaimed again. This seemed too bizarre to be true. I had left the Suburbs to find the Truth, and now I was told to return. Were my travels of the last few days altogether wasted? And why should I find the Truth in the Suburbs now when it had totally eluded me before? Despite his unchanging smile, the gardener didn’t appear to be joking.

“Well, I must advise you to leave now,” the gardener said. “The exit is where you emerged.” He pointed at the very top of the escalator, just visible past a small pond where a lion was frolicking with a gorilla, and where some monkeys were playing. “I wish you a fruitful quest.”

With that, the gardener strolled off, his golden gown soon lost in the golden expanse of grass, accompanied by several small animals which capered at his feet, circled his head or hopped off and on his shoulders. I waited until I was sure he was out of sight, before I uncovered my groin and hunted for my clothes through the grass. I eventually found them, but not in an order in which to put them back on. Beta assisted me, clearly still finding them unnecessary. She leaned over to kiss me as she handed me the underpants, the very last item we found, which had somehow got caught on the lower branch of a small bush.

“Now we go to the Suburbs!”

“Yes, I suppose we do,” I said. “Or rather, in my case, back to the Suburbs.”

I was disappointed at the prospect of returning to a place of such ordinariness and calm. After my travels, the Suburbs was surely going to be an incredible

anticlimax. However, part of me rather welcomed the idea. The Suburbs was my home. I knew my way around. I was safe and secure. And I would no longer have to sleep in smelly alley-ways or dodge fights in night clubs. I also contemplated the very pleasant prospect of introducing Beta to family and friends, and fretted about their inevitable difficulty coping with the presence of someone who dressed as she did and had no understanding of Suburban life.

We wandered back to the escalator, hand in hand, the early afternoon sun beating down on our crowns, the unspeakable beauty of the garden overwhelming our senses and imparting a levity of spirit which we knew would soon be brushed aside once we were back in the busy City streets. We trod on the first step of the escalator which started moving downwards, just as it had earlier moved upwards, and descended down, our spirits correspondingly descending as it did so.

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Soon we were again wandering the City streets admiring the tall centuries-old buildings in the district around the Half Man. The garden and its earthly delights couldn't have seemed further from the growl of slow moving traffic and the crush of innumerable pedestrians. The mid-afternoon sun shone down from a sky only occasionally enlivened by the odd fluffy cloud.

Beta paused outside a grand imposing building, perhaps two or three hundred years old, distinguished by a large triangular stone motif of a woman and an ape carrying geometers and telescopes supported by tall fluted pillars. A statue of a woman stood high on a pedestal at the entrance whose simple cloth garment dropped sufficiently to display her rounded breasts and most of her upper torso. She gazed up at the sky while clutching a large abacus in her arms as if it were a musical instrument.

"What kind of building is this?" Beta wondered, standing in front of the statue and staring up at the forbidding array of windows that dotted the limestone exterior. "It's not a museum or art gallery is it?"

I pointed at a large carved stone on which were sitting several chimpanzees and a macaque, all wearing white overcoats and surrounded by a scattering of books. A small chimpanzee wearing glasses dangled her feet over the enormous carved letters: **THE ACADEMY**. Smaller letters beneath displayed the rest of the title: **of Social and Physical Sciences**.

"The Academy?" mused Beta. "I've heard of that. It's the centre for research and development for the entire country. It deals with science, philosophy, religion,

economics, and almost everything else there is to know about. Shall we have a closer look?”

We strolled past the statue to the foot of the marble steps leading up to the building, which we ascended reverently and peered through the wide open doors of the main entrance into a massive hallway.

“It’s as vast as the interior of the Cathedral!” gasped Beta. “No wonder it’s got such a venerable reputation.”

“And unlike the reputation for superstition of a cathedral, it has one for Truth and Knowledge!” commented a young woman in her late twenties, who, like the chimpanzees outside, wore a long white coat that reached down to her knees. She scrutinised us through a pair of thick spectacles. “Good afternoon. My name is Pandora. Pandora Serenissima. I am an official Academy guide. My function is to escort visitors around the hallowed corridors of the Academy, and my services are provided by the Academy free to anyone who wishes to take advantage of them.”

“That’s very generous,” I remarked.

“The founders of the Academy believed that the fruit of the work pursued within these walls should be available to all. They regarded Truth and Knowledge not as a patented commodity to be hidden from sight and accessible only to the few: so unlike the élitism practised by the various religions. If you so wish, I shall gladly take you on an escorted tour.”

“That sounds a wonderful idea! What do you think?” Beta asked me.

I looked around the quite monstrous proportions of the central hallway that still by no means reached the very top of the building. Ahead of us a wide marble staircase led up, floor by floor, past balconies and small windows, from which could be

glanced the occasional silhouetted figure or the back of a computer screen. At the very top was a huge archaic clock whose roman numerals were perfectly visible even from this great distance. On either side of it stood plaster figures of scantily dressed women carrying more instruments of measurement and calculation. A pendulum dangled from the domed ceiling and swung backwards and forwards some six yards above our heads. There was a general bustle of people, many wearing white coats like that favoured by Pandora, but others sporting a mix of tweed and corduroy.

“The Academy was not built in a day,” Pandora recited, beginning her duties without waiting for my response. “This enormous building has grown up steadily, room by room, floor by floor, from its very modest beginnings many centuries ago. Its original purposes were associated with biblical interpretation and astrology - activities which continue to be performed but attract very little in the way of grants and celebrated throughout history by the construction of grandiose monuments. Some of these can be seen in the Academy’s gardens where they still perform their outmoded purposes of capturing solstice sunlight in baskets and randomly throwing sticks. However, as science and knowledge has grown, so too has the Academy to its modern grandeur, advancing vertically upwards storey by storey, and expanding sideways by the steady acquisition and appropriation of adjacent buildings. This process is set to continue for as long as business and government award grants for the many different branches of research pursued by the Academy.”

“What has this research produced?” wondered Beta.

Pandora laughed. “Just look around you! Look at the City. Look at the Academy. Look at the cars, the trains, the computers and all the modern conveniences. All that is the result of work pursued here. Without it there just wouldn’t be a modern

society. It's all technology driven. And that technology didn't come from nowhere. It was produced by the work for which the Academy is famous. We would still be crossing the seas by sailing ship, toiling with quill and papyrus, freezing in winter and living from day to day. There would be no television. No space exploration. No computers."

"But don't plenty of people still live like that?" objected Beta. "In the Village we still don't have many of the benefits you talk about."

"That's a political problem. That's not the fault of Science. As I see it, and of course I speak as an individual rather than as a representative of the Academy, Science provides and Politics distributes. One should not confuse the two. Science in itself is blind. The knowledge the Academy brings can be applied in countless ways. It can be for the universal good and it can rain death and destruction down on us all. That isn't the fault of Science. That is the fault of political systems."

"Shouldn't the Academy be working towards the common good?" Beta persisted.

"That is a political decision. It's not one for the Academy to be concerned with. It is here to provide enlightenment and knowledge. And doesn't that in itself have great intrinsic worth? Why should the Academy be troubled when its brief is simply to uncover the great truths of the universe? That is its purpose. And that is what it does well. If we didn't know such things: why then we would be no better than primitives who lived in simple self-sufficient communities!"

"But I come from such a place," Beta argued. "We don't find any real need for Science there."

"Nonsense!" sniffed Pandora. "Simple principles such as crop rotation, efficient

harnesses for horses and good agricultural implements all come from Science.”

“But hasn’t Science brought a lot of problems to the world?” I asked.

“We now know that it’s as nothing compared to the destruction that the natural world can wrought. In any case, look at all the uncountable physical, mental and health benefits Science has brought through medicine, arts and economic growth. Nobody could deny that we are all healthier as a result of antibiotics, inoculations and body scanners. We now know so accurately what the causes are of pollution, economic crisis, starvation, disease and warfare. We now know exactly how to improve everyone’s lot.”

“Then why are so many people so poor and ignorant?” Beta asked.

“Politics. People. Stupidity. That’s all. Science can’t be blamed for its misapplication. We may know how to solve the big problems in the world, but it takes political will to apply it. The Academy wasn’t built as a political institution, and that is just and right. The fine work done here is available for everyone, and if the result is nuclear bombs, cruise missiles and ozone depletion: then so be it! It is for government, whether Red, Coition or Illicit, to make the crucial decisions.”

We followed the guide as she strode forward on her flat shoes and up the marble staircase past election posters, already peeling now their use was expended. There were almost equal numbers of them for the Red and Illicit Parties. We strode along a balcony, peering down on the vast hallway, along which occasional stalls were selling political literature. One was covered with pictures of Chairman President Rupert and his marsupial face featured prominently on the tall piles of green books.

“The Illicit Party seems to be very popular here,” I commented.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Pandora mused, as if she had never considered this

before. “I can’t answer why. Politics is not my subject. But there are many people in the Social Sciences department who might know. Would you like to speak to one of them?”

“That sounds interesting,” Beta replied. She grimaced at a poster of Rupert outside a door and crudely painted graffiti which read: **Beware! Red Traitor!** next to a cartoon of an inoffensive orang utan in an ill-fitting denim jacket.

“We are in the Social Sciences department now,” Pandora continued, as we turned off the main balcony and walked along a corridor of ornate wooden doors marked by black plaques on which names of Professors and Doctors were printed in White below their specialisations. These included **Modern Politics**, **Mediæval Housing Policy**, **Sociopathology**, and **Racism, Sexism and Ideological Correctness**. “I must confess it’s not an area of study with which I’m terribly familiar. It all seems very inexact to me. I’m sure that it has provided the world with great insights: but I fail to see how such widely disparate opinions can be held without there being some sense of incoherence. How can Economics be considered a science if there are so many widely different interpretations as to what generates economic growth or even what economic well-being actually means? However, I’m sure Professor Schwarz will be able to enlighten us.”

She stopped outside a door where the professor’s name was displayed just above a poster of President Chairman Rupert and the single word: **TRUTH**. His department was known as Contemporary Sociopoliticoeconomics of which he was the Professor Emeritus. She knocked on the door and on hearing a response she pushed it open to reveal a large study in which the walls were covered by shelves upon shelves of books and a few more posters featuring the face of the President Chairman. A

relatively elderly gibbon sat in a leather chair wearing a tweed jacket, smoking a pipe and reading a large book. He glanced up at us and an indulgent smile peered through the clouds of smoke emanating from the pipe.

“Good afternoon, Pandora. Showing more visitors around the Academy? And who have we here? Welcome. Welcome. I always enjoy entertaining visitors. And why, Pandora, have they thought it desirable to come and see an old ape at study?”

“This young lady was asking questions about the apparent popularity of the Illicit Party and I thought you would be the obvious candidate to answer her questions...”

“...As I am a card-carrying member of the Illicit Party, no doubt? But I am really quite a recent convert. For many years I confess my political views were unashamedly socialist, but I have in recent months found much to persuade me to switch my political allegiance. And now, rather than celebrating, I am rather disgusted by the victory of the Communist and Anarchist Insurrectionists in the General Election. This is a catastrophe of the first order which justifies any action of reprisal or civil disobedience.” He lowered the pince-nez which attached itself precariously to the end of his flattened nose. “I take it that from where you originate the Illicit Party has not gained the significance that it is gaining elsewhere. Perhaps you are unaware of the clarity of vision and the solid scientifically verifiable ideological basis of Illiberal Socialism?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Beta, standing by the side of a large globe of the world while the gibbon took another puff from his hooked pipe. “We’ve seen a great deal of activity from the Illicit Party while we’ve been in the City. A lot of it seems to be very destructive and antisocial.”

“If the ends are justified then so too are the means by which to attain it. What this country - and every other country on this planet - needs is strong government blessed with a clear vision of where it wants to go and not afraid to do what is necessary to get there. A party with an ideology that understands the need for strong central power vested in one person - in this case that of President Chairman Rupert. An ideology set on the discovery and prudent application of the Truth. A party firm and unwavering in its ideological purity, but flexible to change that same ideology in every possible detail to further its ends and the greater good of the people of the Illiberal Socialist state. A party which recognises the necessary links between careful monetary management and strong defence, and does not kow-tow to the malevolent socialist and liberal policies of trades unions, intellectuals and artists.”

“I just don’t know what it is that the Illicit Party represents,” Beta wondered. “All we’ve seen of it is violence and intimidation.”

“In the right place, these methods of political persuasion, along with indoctrination, terrorism, assassination and kidnapping, are all integral to the pursuit of far-reaching and irreversible change. Let us not be shy about this. Political change is not a painless process.”

“But why Illicitism?” I asked. “Why should I support Rupert’s party rather than the Red, Black or Green Parties?”

“The Illicit Party is the party of the resolution of antitheses. It is a party which has the boldness to adopt the best of political ideologies long thought of as opposites. A party which adopts the traditional Communist policies of economic centralisation; political control through Party infiltration at all levels; and an end to the dominance of the working class by the *petit bourgeoisie*. A party which also adopts the Black Party

policies of racial purity, dictatorship and the militarisation of civil society. A party not afraid to sacrifice jobs, personal freedom and pluralism to economic growth, progress and pragmatic dogmatism. No other party offers so much and can reconcile so many apparently opposing views.”

Pandora laughed. “I really don’t understand you social scientists! Only you could possibly believe that it is possible for a doctrine to be two things simultaneously. Aren’t there reasons to support the Illicit cause that might be more persuasive to the scientist?”

“Historical necessity,” answered the gibbon, with a wild look of triumph, thrusting his pince-nez into the air while resting the leather patch of his elbow on the desk. “The study of Sociopoliticoeconomics has proved that all political change comes about because it is necessary and unavoidable. As society changes - whether through technological innovation or military conquest - then its ideological underpinning must also change. I am convinced that the inevitable and unavoidable consequence of the changes in our highly complex society demands the adoption of an ideology which seeks to reduce these complexities to simple and undeniable concepts such as those pursued by the Illicit Party. Power. Truth. Wealth. What simpler goals of government and social change could there be? A society freed of the baleful influences of Cats, intellectual dissidence, pacifism and religion. A society cleansed of the evils of homosexuality, feminism, modern art and uncertainty. A society focused like a laser beam on the greater good revealed by the Truth.”

“I still don’t see how it is historically necessary that Illicit ideology should dominate,” Pandora objected.

“It just is. Society is a complex interweaving of social, political and economic

factors, and political parties succeed best when they represent the purest essence of its nature. No party better reflects our modern society than the Illicit Party. Consequently, the Illicit Party will and must take power. But don't listen to arguments of political necessity alone. Think also of the desirability of Illicit government. The purpose of government is to facilitate the greater good of the society it represents. That greater good can best be measured in terms of economic indicators and territorial extent. What Illicitism promises, - and has delivered in the Illiberal Socialist Republics, - is economic strength as proven by its copious statistics of production and productivity, coupled with an unashamed hunger for extraterritorial acquisition. The combination of aggressive centralised economic policies with an equally aggressive military stance equals the best method of political and social advance, at the expense only of the cancerous elements of society which most deserve to be cauterised."

After leaving Professor Schwarz's study, Pandora led us to an elevator and beckoned us inside. "So much for Social Sciences!" she remarked. "If we'd spoken to Professor Biyad we'd have learnt why pragmatism is the sole purpose of government. Or to Doctor Rosso why, as society is a thoroughly mutable phenomenon, it is impossible to properly understand it. I'll take you up to the Physical Sciences department where differences of opinion are on a much smaller scale."

The doors of the lift opened and we were in corridors quite obviously more modern, where the doors had no handles and the names of the occupants were written on small LED displays just by the side. "This is where true knowledge is acquired. Here and on the many storeys towering high above us. Here are studied the eleven dimensions of the universe; the fractions of the Avogadro number; the metaconsistency of fractals; the curvature of time; the instances of dark matter; and other such crucial

subjects upon which has been built our current prosperity and happiness.”

“I don’t really understand how that is,” Beta objected. “I’m sure my life hasn’t been that much improved by knowing that space and time bend under gravitational force, or that the entire universe was originally just a perturbation in infinity. I’m sure that my life would be just as happy and profitable if I thought the world was as flat as a pizza, only six thousand years old and that the moon was made of green cheese.”

Pandora laughed. “What an absurd idea! The fact you know that these things aren’t true tells me that you surely can’t be serious. Without a knowledge of quantum fluctuation, time reversal and solid light how could our society possibly exist?”

“I’m afraid I have to agree with your guide there,” remarked the equine voice of the Unicorn whom I’d met a few days earlier in Gotesdene and who appeared from behind us. He trotted along on his dainty cloven feet, radiating an apparent golden sheen reflected off his horn and mane. He lowered his head slightly, shook it from side to side, and then levelled it to meet his eyes with ours. “Good afternoon, again, young man. You have indeed travelled a long way in your search for the Truth. Do you hope to find it here in the Academy?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“It certainly seems a more likely location than the Suburbs, where I gather the Illicitists are heading in their own quest. I would have thought that a place like the Academy, where so many brilliant minds are gathered in the whole-hearted pursuance of different aspects of the Truth, would be a far more likely place to find the Truth than streets and avenues of semi-detached houses and manicured lawns.”

“What are you doing here?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Well, I’m not here on a quest like you,” the Unicorn laughed. “And your

young lady friend? Are you also seeking the Truth with our Suburban friend?"

Beta nodded shyly, clearly in some awe at the sight of the Unicorn. "I don't know if we'll find it here. It does seem such a big place."

"Yes. If the Truth were here, you could spend a very long time finding which room it was hiding in. No, I'm here as a guest of the Academy's scientists because of the rather long term perspectives I have on historical events. It's amazing just how much interest they find in the things I've seen or witnessed. What was the weather like in the eighteenth century? Did Francis Bacon write *King Lear*? Did the Mediæval Chinese use silicon chip technology? Was Crete anchored in the Atlantic ocean? How big was the ozone hole after Mount Vesuvius exploded? All fascinating stuff."

"I dare say there are scientists interested in you as an individual," remarked Pandora admiringly. "You've lived such a long time, haven't you?"

"A very long time. Well, samples of my genes have been studied to exhaustion and my horn is forever having to struggle to replenish the samples scraped off it. Some people still question whether I even exist. Some argue that I am extinct and others that I am physically impossible. And some even say that as a mythological beast I shouldn't be here at all. It's all very interesting. I sometimes wonder myself if I exist. What do you think?"

"You look - and feel - real enough to me!" Beta remarked running her fingers along the length of the Unicorn's very firm horn.

"Well, appearances can be very deceptive you know. It could be that I am indeed not real. That I am nothing but the product of generations of imagination, thrown together from elements of different animals like elands, lions, horses and goats, and turned into a symbol of hope and nostalgia. It could be that I am real and that none

of you are real. That this guide here is nothing more than an astrological motif. That you, my dear, are only a fantasy of incongruity in a modern age. And that my Suburban friend is nothing but a vehicle for everyone else to reflect their existence through his nullity. It could be that the City is nothing more than a mythical location in a mythical modern age.”

“That’s nonsense!” laughed Pandora. “There are no doubt levels of scale and abstraction in which one can doubt the solidity of real life. But if there is anything of which I am certain it is that I exist, and it would seem absurd to me that the world around me didn’t exist. How can any sane person deny this? It is on this fundamental premise that all empirical research is built and the foundation on which science and technology is based.”

“I don’t believe that the world could possibly be such a complex and frightening place if it weren’t real,” Beta elaborated. “I know it all sounds pretty fantastic: all this stuff about parallel universes, fragmented spacetime and multidimensional moëbius bands. But I’m sure that it is as real as we are. And you as well, I’m sure.”

The Unicorn tossed his head from side to side, as if shaking off the suggestion of his lack of reality. He raised it and addressed me again. “So, how do you like the City? I’m glad to see that you took my advice and came here after leaving Gotesdene. It’s very different from the Country, don’t you think?”

I nodded. “It’s difficult to believe we’re in the same realm. How can there be so much wealth here and so little in the Country? And things are so expensive here! How can that be?”

“I’m sure there are people in the Academy who could answer your questions

far more authoritatively than me. Isn't that so?"

"Indeed, there are many experts here who have thoroughly studied the disparities of the City and the Country in all sorts of disciplines," confirmed Pandora. "There are Economics professors who argue that the cause is the greater degree of economic activity in the City creating a disproportionate amount of wealth, which reinforces itself by creaming off all surplus economic activity from the Country to satisfy its requirements for labour and resources. There are Sociologists who say that the City is the natural product of the need for people to gather in large units thereby concentrating greater opportunities in the areas of greatest population density. There are Archaeologists who would argue that the City is the manifestation of civilisation and without it there would be no science, no technology and no culture. There are Political Scientists who warn that the concentration of wealth in the City is a danger as it bleeds dry the resources of the Country to feed its needs, and that eventually the process must result in an event in which the Country collapses economically and drags the City down with it. There are others who say that the City is merely a phase of society and that eventually the process will go into reverse and that the City will become depopulated and units of production will shift into the Country as technology removes the economic advantage of geographical proximity."

"I daresay there is a theory for every individual working in the Academy!" hinnied the Unicorn. "However, I spend a great deal of time in the Country - as I do in the City - and it worries me how the Country can survive as it is for very much longer. I fear that it is fast gaining all the detrimental side affects of City life and precious few of its benefits. And as long as those in the City remain so apparently wealthy (even if their money buys so little) then those living in the Country will feel increasing

resentment. And while there is mounting dissatisfaction there is also a real risk of major social upheaval.”

Pandora smiled. “Perhaps, if we’re discussing the City and the Country, we should be in the Geography department rather than the Physical Sciences. I live in the City. There seem to be quite enough problems here without needing to worry about the Country. A lot of it is just economic activity. Nothing in the City can keep pace with it.”

“Things *do* change very fast in the City,” the Unicorn agreed. “I can barely recognise some parts of it from the last time I visited. Green fields become housing estates. Slums become industrial parks. Railway stations become supermarkets. Department stores become multi-storey car parks. And the pollution! It seems to change all the time. Once it was coal smoke and ordure. Then it was petrol fumes and nuclear radiation. Now it seems to be noise and ultraviolet light. My head just fills with the smells, sounds and stress of the City: clogging up my nostrils and leaving black grease between my cloven hooves.”

“Where does all the pollution come from?” wondered Beta naïvely.

“Ultimately it comes from the Country and from abroad,” the Unicorn replied. “The raw materials are imported into the City and converted into petrol, polystyrene, newspapers, plastic bottles and street lighting. This in turn is discarded as waste - sometimes solid, sometimes liquid, sometimes gas, and sometimes as specks of dust floating above the street. Then I don’t know what happens to it all.”

“It gets returned to the Country,” Pandora answered, without a hint of irony in her voice. “That’s where all the rubbish heaps, nuclear dumps and sewage farms are. You don’t want all that foul stuff polluting the City, do you?”

“So, it gets returned to where it came from in a different form to how it was sent,” Beta mused. “I suppose that’s only fair. Perhaps it can be sent back to the City later.”

“Only if it’s cleaned and made properly sterile,” sniffed Pandora dismissively.

“The City may be a very stressful place, but I love it,” the Unicorn added. “It’s such an exciting place. The world would be a sorrier place without it. This is where all the culture is, where all the shops are, where all the money is. It has to be somewhere, and this is it. I see the City growing and growing. Expanding by acquisition and growth. Rather like this Academy. The buildings grow ever taller. More and more of the Country is sacrificed to accommodate the hunger for land. Roads penetrate deeper and deeper into what were once pampas, dense forests and marshland. And as it expands, the City’s heart becomes increasingly derelict as yesterday’s technology becomes today’s industrial wasteland.”

Beta frowned. “Are you implying that the City will eventually swallow up all the Country?”

“I can’t see that happening at all!” laughed Pandora sceptically. “There’s an awful lot of Country. And big though the City might be, - and bigger still as it may well be in the future, - it couldn’t possibly expand that much.”

“You say that,” the Unicorn argued sadly, “and there must be truth in what you say. The City needs a world beyond it to survive. But I’ve seen the City double and double generation after generation. I remember when all this didn’t exist: the tall buildings, the busy roads, the night clubs, the underground trains. I remember when the City was just a small village of Celtic peasants fishing in the river and hunting mammoths. I’ve seen the City grow to be a small town, and then grow ever bigger,

swallowing up other villages and towns, paving the dirt-tracks with tar macadam, laying railway tracks through ancient palaces and digging underground sewerage canals beneath cathedrals. I've known places famous for picturesque waterfalls and herds of wildebeest which are now buried under skyscrapers, underpasses and flyovers. If the City does indeed grow at its present exponential rate then surely, by all the rules of geometric progression, this nation will become just one vast City from border to border, from shore to shore and from deep beneath the ground to high above the sky."

"That can't happen!" Pandora objected. "Before then the whole edifice would have to collapse. It can't expand too far or too fast without exceeding all the available resources, and stretching its ability to service its needs beyond its capacity to do so!"

The Unicorn nodded sagely. "I'm sure you're right. I'm sure you're absolutely right! However, I'm hungry. Would you like to join me for a meal in the Academy's excellent restaurant?"

Beta protested about the cost, but the Unicorn dismissed her objections. "It's no problem to me to afford it," he assured us.

Pandora and he led us along a series of corridors and down several storeys to the refectory which was a large hall of tables, chairs and an extensive counter serving sandwiches, snacks and hot meals. A few people were scattered about the tables, many wearing white coats, and chatting over coffee and biscuits. We selected some sandwiches and drinks at the counter and the Unicorn paid the barbary ape serving at the till. We sat down at a table, with the Unicorn standing to one side, chewing on clumps from the trough of hay he'd ordered for himself.

"So, young man, do you think your visit to the Academy has brought you any closer in your search for the Truth?" he asked, strands of hay drooping from his lips.

“Or do you think that the Illicit Party is correct in seeking the Truth in the Suburbs?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied thoughtfully. “We haven’t actually found the Truth here, and I get the impression that there is too much disagreement amongst the distinguished professors and academics as to what the Truth may be, for it to be likely to find it here.”

“In any case,” Beta interjected, “we were advised by someone we’ve recently met to follow this Rupert and search for the Truth in the Suburbs. We were told that there would really be nothing lost by doing so.”

“Indeed not,” agreed the Unicorn. “Though it does seem the most unlikely place in the entire universe for it to be. And aren’t the Suburbs exactly the place from which your search began? What point is there of retracing your steps?”

Before I could answer him, we were approached by a chimpanzee in a white coat carrying a clipboard and with a pencil protruding from the chest pocket.

“Ah! There you are!” she exclaimed to the Unicorn. “I was hoping I’d meet you. I’d like to introduce you to a colleague of mine, Doctor Dixhuit, who would like to discuss your observations of Mediæval crop rotation.” She indicated a colobus monkey. “Could we possibly trouble you for a few moments?”

“Certainly you may,” replied the Unicorn amiably. “Anything I can do to further the cause of knowledge.”

He bid the three of us farewell and trotted off out of the canteen between the two simians.

Pandora observed him leave, and then turned towards us with a small frown. “Excuse me, but am I right in understanding from your exchange with our artiodactyl friend that you two are searching for the Truth just like those fanatics from the Illicit

Party?”

We nodded. “It seems a very worthwhile pursuit,” Beta explained.

“Indeed it is,” our guide agreed, “but not one I would have thought to be pursued merely by wandering about. All of us in the employ of the Academy are seeking the Truth, but none of us would seriously contend that it can be discovered just by walking about the City or even the Suburbs. The Truth is a much more abstract and intangible entity, and its eventual discovery is much more likely through the process of scientific enquiry.”

“How does that work?” Beta wondered.

“Quite simply by the process of postulating a hypothesis and demonstrating its truth or falsity. The Truth by its very nature is something which must lend itself to logical proof. It must be something for which there can be ultimately no countervailing hypothesis which can be proved to also be true.”

“But isn’t science to do with observation and experimentation rather than pure logic?” Beta persisted.

“Naturally. If a hypothesis is true, it must be possible to demonstrate its truth by reference to the real world.”

“Is it necessarily the case that the Truth *can* be shown to be true by such means?”

Pandora raised an eyebrow. “What a bizarre idea! Are you suggesting that the Truth is in some inexplicable way divorced from the real world of scientific enquiry? Can you be seriously implying that the Truth is not ultimately a physical and actual attribute of the universe? What else could it be?”

“How can that explain love, beauty and morality? Where are the ethics of a

simple mathematical equation? Where is emotion or feeling in a Truth like that? Where are passion, ecstasy, desire and hope? Where is the possibility of love?"

"What do you mean by love?" wondered Pandora, seeming genuinely puzzled by Beta's repetition of this theme. "Love is nothing more than a biological process evolved in social animals for group cohesion and sexual bonding."

"That doesn't seem right!" objected Beta, holding my hand and looking defiantly at Pandora. "Love is the expression of the strongest and most positive feeling there can possibly be. It fills the mind, the body and the soul, and changes our perception of everything. Don't Christians, for instance, say that God is Love?"

"That's nothing but theological nonsense!" sniffed Pandora. "However, I wouldn't confuse love in the religious sense, which is both promiscuous and indiscriminate, with the carnal love which I suspect you have indulged in. Am I right in assuming that you are not a virgin?"

Beta blushed, and squeezed my hand rather more tightly. "What did you say?"

"Are you a virgin? Or have you indulged in physical and carnal activity?"

Beta shook her head slowly and a little guiltily looking down at the table and the plate in which the crumbs of her sandwich were scattered.

"It is then no wonder that you have such a strange and unscientific view of the world. I have *never* felt the need of diverting my energies away from the pure and wholly absorbing search for scientific Truth with such disgusting, nasty and bestial activities as copulation. What kind of person would I be if I allowed myself to indulge in such unrefined and unconstructive activity?"

Neither Beta nor I had expected such an outburst from the guide, and an uneasy silence prevailed while Pandora sipped her tea and Beta looked down at her

plate clearly very upset at her admonishment, but still tightly gripping my hand. Pandora finished her tea and put down her plastic cup.

“Well, it’s been nice meeting you,” she said in a polite but cold voice. “I wish you the best in your futile search for the Truth, though it would have been more profitable for you to support rather the research of the Academy than the fantasies of a foreign dictator.”

With that Pandora left, and Beta and I sat together in the expanse of the refectory. We felt somewhat ill at ease sitting there after our small lunch and dressed so very differently from the academics gathered around.

“Pandora *must* be wrong with what she says about the Truth. It *couldn’t* be the Truth at all if it wasn’t also Love,” bravely insisted Beta.

19

Two or three furlongs from the Academy, the road became much wider and the traffic much lighter. On either side of us were large buildings built in an earlier age with towering flags outside and guarded by uniformed figures armed with submachine guns and very uncompromising expressions. A few large, quite splendid, cars were parked alongside the pavement in which sat figures wearing peaked caps and dark jackets. A young woman in quite flimsy clothes was escorted into one of the cars by a retinue of proud looking roosters, one of whom held the door open as she bowed her head to enter. She waved at the roosters as the car pulled off, driven by another woman in a peaked hat and uniform, and they waved back to her. When the car had moved out of sight, the roosters turned around and marched stiffly back through the open gates of one of the tall buildings, respectful salutes following them as they strode by. The gates were secured behind them, and we saw the plaque outside which was for the Democratic Republic of Fowls. A tall standard reared above us from which waved a flag in the slight early evening breeze featuring the silhouette of another rooster and a rising sun.

“We must be in the ambassadorial district,” I remarked to Beta, who was treading in some discomfort on some flakes of corn that must have been thrown on some passing dignitary.

“Indeed, we must!” Beta agreed, peering up at the opaque windows and the grandiose murals above the massive doorways. “There seem to be all nations here. The Illiberal Socialist Republics. The United Canine Republics. The Virgin Islands. And

isn't that the Kingdom of the Cats!"

She indicated a particularly grand building in front of which stood a sentry box manned by a tall Cat in traditional dress, wearing a bright array of blue, red and green, a large feathered hat, and a quite incongruous submachine gun. Above the sentry box were a cruel array of electric wires and spikes and a monstrous scarlet flag featuring the idealised face of a Cat wearing a large gold crown. To the left of the sentry box was the figure of a young woman lying helplessly on some steps, long white hair smeared with filth and quite clearly seriously pregnant.

"It's Una!" gasped Beta. "What's she doing here? I thought Lord Arthur was looking after her!"

"He didn't seem like he could look after himself, let alone anyone else, when we met him this morning!" I remarked.

"You think so?" wondered Beta ingenuously. "Anyway, we *must* help Una!"

She ran ahead and caught up with the girl who was quite oblivious to her attention, as Beta put her arms around the thin shoulders barely covered at all by the filthy shirt she'd somehow acquired and bent her head over to examine her face. I walked up to them, feeling as always rather redundant in this show of concern and charity.

"How is she?" I asked, studying her haunted pale face and the eyes that barely saw me or even Beta. Before my companion could answer, Una burst into a frightening cry which seemed to emerge somewhere from deep inside her belly and struggled gutturally into the air. Her body shuddered in frightening spasms and rivulets of perspiration ran down her cheeks.

"She's in obvious pain!" Beta diagnosed dispassionately. "I think she might be

about to give birth!”

“What here? In the street?”

“Well, where else? Unless you have a better idea?”

“Shouldn’t we call for some help?” I wondered rationally, quite terrified of the very notion of Una giving birth on the filth covered streets of the City with none of the attention from midwives, hospital lights and high technology that I associated with giving birth in the Suburbs. I looked at the large swollen hump on Una’s otherwise painfully thin frame and fancied I could see it erupt in painful spasms as she yelled yet again under the impassive stare of the Cat guard.

“Try the Cat Kingdom Embassy,” Beta advised, pulling Una’s heavy figure onto her knees and resting her bare buttocks on the dusty pavement, a leg sprawled out to offer the pregnant girl additional support.

“The Embassy?” I queried, looking helplessly at the less than promising sight of the Cat guard who had barely blinked at all at the sight of this poignant scene. I couldn’t deny the logic of Beta’s suggestion, so I strode over to the guard and asked him if it were at all possible for the Embassy to let us in, call an ambulance and for Una to be cared for by expert hands.

“No,” the guard said gruffly. He glanced at Una and Beta, moving only his eyes and not his head at all. “It’s more than my job’s worth!” he added apologetically and at a much lower volume. “You could be terrorists. Illiberal Socialists who want to bomb the Embassy. Canine Sympathisers. Rooster Separatists. I just can’t be sure.”

“But you can see that we’re none of those things!” I pleaded. “You can see she’s pregnant and in pain.”

“It could all be a dastardly ploy!” the Cat continued, but not very convincingly.

“She could be a virgin for all I know, just pretending to be pregnant.”

“But couldn’t you at least ask someone inside if we could come in?”

The guard glanced at Una again, and winced slightly, clearly affected by the girl’s plight. He looked up and down the road and then nodded very slightly.

“I’ll ask,” he promised in a low voice. “But I can’t promise you anything.”

He turned around and marched to an intercom at the gate entrance, above which a small camera lens was purposefully revolving and focused on me as I stood back in its gaze, watching Beta with some concern trying to comfort Una with mumbled comments and occasionally glancing up at me with wide-eyed optimism. I really held very little hope that anything positive could come of this, and was already eyeing other buildings in the hope that they might be more forthcoming in their assistance. I was rather surprised, in fact, when, after what seemed like nearly twenty minutes, the guard approached me, his submachine gun lowered, and purring with pride.

“The Ambassador himself - His Honour the Ambassador, I should say - has deigned to permit you and your friends access to the Embassy,” he announced with distinct relief. “Apparently he knows you from somewhere, sir. You must be a much more senior person than you appear to be.”

It was then that with a flurry of activity that took Beta and me quite by surprise, a group of hens in white coats, clucking with concern and anxiety, hurried from the doors of the Embassy and through the gates which automatically opened as they approached. They sympathetically lifted Una up by their wings onto a stretcher and carried her away through the gates and up the steps into the tall building, with Beta and me following behind.

“I was *sure* they’d help,” Beta confided, taking my hand in hers. “Surely, they couldn’t just leave Una suffering as she was.”

I didn’t wish to disillusion Beta’s great faith in feline nature by informing her that it was most likely more to do with the fact that I’d met the Ambassador a few days earlier at a party. We ascended the steps, leaving the guard to his duties and entered a large reception area full of large leather sofas and lit by an enormous chandelier. Una was borne away through an ornate door, and we were bid to sit down on one of the sofas by a bare-headed Cat in a black cloak carrying a portable computer in his paws and purring reassuringly.

We sat down in the immensity of the room which was adorned by enormous portraits of the King of the Cats and opposite a long desk where a hen was busily typing in front of a monitor and a young Cat with a blue waistcoat stood behind her, regarding us with a slight frown. Another Cat sat in a chair opposite us with bandages around his face and a paw in plaster hanging from a sling. He barely stirred as we entered and stared fixedly behind the desk at the motto in Ancient Greek which hung below a shield supported by rampant Cats that was carved in wood by two large flags.

There followed a fresh flurry of activity as the Cat Ambassador I’d met at the Party entered the room in his finery accompanied by other Cats hardly any less ostentatiously dressed than him. He strode over to Beta and me, and we stood up to meet his outstretched gloved paw. I shook it and distinctly felt his velvet pad and the distinct impression of his claws through the fine leather.

“I am very honoured that you could help our friend...” I said.

“The honour is mine,” the Ambassador said modestly. “My people have always believed that it is our duty to give assistance where assistance is required. And in any

case, it is always a pleasure to assist a friend of Zitha's and her father." He took Beta's hand and squeezed it with some firmness. "And this is your delightful wife. She clearly does not come from the same part of the country as you, judging from her dress. What is that district called again? The Suburbs, isn't it?"

"Yes, your honour," I answered.

"The Suburbs?" reflected the Ambassador. "Since I last met you, I have heard so much more about it. All of a sudden, it appears to be *such* a newsworthy place. So many thousands of your people are congregating there for some reason. Is it a holy place, by any chance?"

"Not that I know of, although the Suburbs are famous for their relative tranquillity"

"That must be the cause of their sudden popularity. Since the General Election yesterday, there really does seem to be a distinct lack of tranquillity in your benighted country. I really don't understand it. I thought this Election was intended to somehow lessen the tension and disorder in this land, and yet it appears to have made it much worse. It is certainly no advertisement for democracy and only makes my conviction firmer that our nation - the Kingdom of the Cats - is so much the better for having opted for a government of Regal Authority, despite the clamour of those even in our own soil who agitate for mob rule. Still, if a General Election can result in a government by communists, anarchists and pagans, it is perhaps no wonder that there is so much discord. Your Red Party was almost the worst possible choice. They could *never* attain power in my nation."

"Do you not like democracy?" Beta wondered.

The Ambassador mewed slightly as if in pain. "It is not for me to express my

opinion of how other countries choose to organise their affairs. If, for whatever misguided and short-sighted reason, your polygeneric, multicultural nation wishes to adopt a government driven by unpredictable swerves of government from right to left, red to blue, and up to down, then so be it. It is not a course of action the Cats will ever take. We are blessed by a tradition of royal dictatorship sanctioned by the Lord God Himself, whose name must never be taken in vain. In our happy tradition we can be certain that the wisdom and sanctity of His Majesty will ensure the best for our species - blighted though it might be by unworthy and undoubtedly illegitimate holders of the title in the long history of our kind. And now more than ever, as our traditional home is besieged by the Puritan Dog Republics, the Rooster Rebellions, the Mouse *intifada* and the hostility of the godless, and aptly named, Illicit Party, it is necessary for our people to hold firm to a tradition of strong and uncompromising government that stays true to the Feline Cause and the Divine Right of Kings to Rule.”

“Why do the Dogs and Mice so dislike the Cat Kingdom?” Beta asked.

“Who can say? Envy, I imagine. The Dogs are so poor at governing themselves, they can’t bear to see an efficient government *and* an efficient economy in such close geographical proximity. If the Canine Republics were so perfect then why do so few Dogs from the Cat Kingdom ever want to live in them (and we give them plenty of encouragement and opportunity to do so!) and why are these Dog Republics always at war with each other? Labrador against Husky. Terrier against Spaniel. Lap Dog against Wolfhound. They’re always at it! In fact, if they stopped fighting each other and crippling their economies with their stupid puritan practices they’d probably be quite an appreciable foe to the Feline Kingdom. And the Mice, - and the Roosters who’re also a bit of a nuisance in our country, - are just as bad. The Mice are

particularly bad. They couldn't organise a cheese orgy, let alone a whole country. They're just lazy good-for-nothing ignoramuses who are much better at civil disobedience and rioting than they could ever be at the much more difficult task of government and administration. Always running around squeaking and complaining. They just don't appreciate what a gigantic favour is being done for them to be governed by a truly sane and tolerant government such as that exercised by His Royal Highness."

The Cat Ambassador gestured his paw at the sofa. "Don't feel obliged to stand. Sit down and tell me how it is that you happen to be here so far from where I met you last. What brings you to the City and of course to the Embassy?"

Beta and I sat down, and the Ambassador sat on a sofa opposite us. He flourished a paw irritably at his assistants who with a series of low bows and gestures bid their farewells and departed, with the exception of one who was carrying a portable pocket computer and sat on another chair beside the Cat in bandages.

"We're here in pursuit of the Truth, sir," Beta replied.

"The Truth?"

"Yes," I elaborated. "We're on a search for the Truth which took me to the Party at which I met you and has since taken me across the Country to the City."

"And this Truth, is it not the same entity that is currently being sought by the Godless Illicitists when they are not actively persecuting Cats like our poor confederate here?" asked the Ambassador gesturing to the Cat in bandages. "How can anything even indirectly associated with Rupert and his accursed lawless band of racists possibly be of any worth?"

"I was searching for the Truth before I heard of Rupert's interest in it," I

answered. "I just thought something that promised so much must be worth pursuing."

"I see," mused the Ambassador. "Well I'm sure your quest can only be from the highest and most worthy of motives, however misguided and unconstructive it may be. The Truth and what it represents is really not something upon which I am at all qualified to speak. Concerns of such a metaphysical level rarely impinge on my role as Ambassador and spokesperson of my Kingdom. My task is to represent the King and his government in as best a way I can, and to serve the interests of the Feline people. The King has no stated opinion or policy regarding the Truth, but were he or his ministers to adopt one I would strive to present it to your nation in the best light possible. However, my own opinion, for what it is worth, is that this pursuit for the Truth which is currently directed towards your Suburbs seems to be nothing but a very dangerous destabilising influence for your nation after the General Election."

"What do you mean by that, your honour?" Beta wondered. "How can the search for something which promises to answer all the great and profound questions of all time and bring prosperity and happiness to everyone possibly be anything but good?"

The Ambassador pulled a glove off one of his paws and scratched an ear beneath the brim of his enormous hat closing an eye in apparent pleasure and contemplation.

"I am surely not the first person to remark that causes, however honourable and worthy they may at first seem, are often perverted towards ends which are wholly contradictory to their original purpose. I am automatically suspicious of any cause embraced by that accursed koala, but even were it a Cat (unless it were the King himself) I feel that my considered response would be scepticism and wariness. What do

you think will actually be gained by so many people, - and not just those from the Illicit Party I believe, - pursuing the Truth? And from where has this notion come that the Truth can be found in your Suburbs? If you come from the Suburbs yourself why then did you not find it there, rather than travelling so many leagues to the City?"

"It just hadn't occurred to me that the Truth could possibly be found in the Suburbs. It seemed quite the most unlikely place to find it. And in any case I wasn't at all sure what the Truth might be."

"And do you have a better idea now of what it might be?"

"Not really," I admitted. "Plenty of people have told me what they think the Truth might be, but there seem to be as many different opinions as there are people."

"As few as that!" the Ambassador observed. "I find it incredible that such apparently intelligent people as you and your companion should believe that the Truth were some kind of physical entity of absolute and undeniable tangibility. In my experience, the Truth, or what element there is of it that is relevant for the business of conducting a sane and honourable life, is a shifting mutable concept that changes according to the whims of expediency and fortune. On occasion, that which is most demonstrably correct can also be the worst of all possible actions. For instance, almost all of us would believe that the murder of another person can only be wrong. However, when there is a war, of which our people are much experienced, such a naïve attitude can only be disastrous when confronting a belligerent foe, and can only bring great misery to the defending side. So too is the conduct required against those who from one perspective are merely demanding their rights, such as the Mice and Roosters who populate my Kingdom. To treat these people as if they were worthy of respect and deserving of equality with the Cats whose inalienable right to the land is nearly

universally recognised will invite nothing but further discord to the Kingdom. And I feel that this pursuit of the Truth, which is undoubtedly pursued by many such as yourselves for the most honourable and virtuous of ideals, is nothing more than another blow to the stability of your state and could well capsize the whole edifice.”

“How can the pursuit of something good be anything other than good?” Beta objected. “Surely nothing could ever be improved if people only acted according to what seemed best at any particular time? Surely there must be motives for actions which are more than those determined by circumstances?”

“Absolutely not!” the Ambassador stated firmly. “At any one time there can only be one object or mission, with many different aspects. This mission has to be pursued with extreme prejudice if it is to ever succeed. The value of any actions within the pursuit of that mission can only be evaluated by how far it furthers that particular mission, although should the object of endeavour be changed then it will be necessary to comprehensively review all previous actions in the light of that revision. In our Kingdom, the state exists as the extension of the King, whoever that may be at any one time. The purpose of the state is therefore to further the objects and fancies of the King, wheresoever it may lead, and by extension the greater good of the King’s subjects who by the principle of the Divine Duty to Serve are best served by whatever is in the best interests of His Majesty. My task and that of all my compatriots is to serve the King as best we can, irrespective of how apparently inconsistent this may seem over time and irrespective of how vastly different one King’s policies may be from another. My actions can only be judged according to how well they accord with the King’s desires, and in that lies all the Truth that there ever needs to be.”

“I just can’t believe that the Truth can change according to the complexion of

the King and his policies!” Beta objected. “The whole value of the Truth is that it is eternally fixed and can *never* change. How can something be wrong one day and right the next just because the King says so?”

“In your case, neither being a subject of the King nor a Cat, the rightness and wrongness of your actions are determined by other factors, although *I* will judge them quite differently. The Truth is wholly relative and depends entirely on the perspective from which it is viewed and in whose interest it is pursued. However, I mustn’t detain you forever with my own philosophical musing. You are no doubt more concerned in the welfare of your pregnant friend.” The Ambassador stood up and gestured to his secretary who also stood. “Please feel free to wait here until further news comes from our medical staff who are currently sparing no pains in seeing that your friend gives birth with the minimum of pain and the maximum of appropriate attention. My staff will notify you as soon as there are any significant developments.”

With that, the Ambassador and his secretary strode off through a large oaken door which closed behind them very securely, leaving Beta and I sitting together with the bandaged Cat. Beta was agitated with concern for Una’s welfare and disturbed by the Ambassador’s unsympathetic attitude towards our search. She picked up one of the glossy magazines that were left on the table for visitors to read, but neither she nor I could really concentrate on them. They all featured copious pictures of the King of the Cats, dressed in a startling array of clothes and posing in magnificent surroundings busy in condescending to his own people or to representatives of other nationalities. The text extolled the virtue of the King, his deeds and words in ways that made me feel rather impoverished that I had somehow passed most of my life in utter ignorance of his great wisdom and fitness to govern. Those articles not glorifying the King were

mostly just advertisements for the great business opportunities provided by the Kingdom, its phenomenal economic growth rates (somehow personally overseen by the King), its vibrant and exciting traditional culture, and the attractiveness of its tourist resorts.

Beta put down the magazine she'd been scanning - **The Royal Times** - and looked at me with a frown. It was open at a glossy picture featuring a very international set of tourists enjoying the sun in the company of some Cats and served drinks by a retinue of hens. "I do hope Una's alright? I hope the medical staff understand the differences between a human birth and a Cat birth. They won't be expecting her to give birth to a litter of blind hairless kittens, will they?"

"Of course not!" I robustly reassured her, but nonetheless feeling less than sure myself now that the notion had been put into my head.

We waited for several hours in the foyer while the Embassy staff changed at the turn of their rotas and the bandaged Cat was led away by a young lady in a long white tunic into one of the rooms to which we had no access. In the meantime, Beta and I read the literature rather more thoroughly than we would have preferred, and I built up a picture of the Cat Kingdom as being very happy and stable and which would indeed be paradise if it were not for the disruptive elements within its borders and the necessary strain of defending itself from the aggressive Canine Republics. One article attempted to explain the conflict from what purported to be the perspective of the Dog, but its main thrust was that they had been comprehensively misled by their government and seditious propaganda to not fully understand how what was good for the Cat Kingdom was necessarily good for them. There were also articles eulogising wealthy Cats living abroad who had donated so much of their wealth and prestige to

the Feline cause.

“What can be happening?” agitated Beta. “I *do* hope Una’s alright!”

As if in response to her worries, a door opened and a Cat in a long white coat entered the reception area. He surveyed the room, and, on seeing us, strode towards us.

“I take it you are waiting to see how your friend is,” he remarked.

He sat down on the chair where the Ambassador had sat and leaned across to us.

Beta also leaned forward, her long hair cascading onto the table in front and a bare arm supporting her weight: “How is she?” she pleaded.

“She’s fine. It wasn’t a particularly difficult birth by human standards, though rather more painful and awkward than it would have been for a Cat. She has a male kitten - sorry, baby. What you humans call a boy. She’s recovering quite well considering the uncomfortable circumstances surrounding it. I take it that you are going to take her home?”

“I’m afraid not,” I confessed. “Both of us are strangers to the City and Una doesn’t have a home. In fact, we don’t even know where we’ll be sleeping tonight.”

“I see,” mused the Cat doctor. “Well, I’m sure the Embassy will be able to assist you, seeing as you are such good friends of the Ambassador. I will have to ensure that suitable arrangements are made.” He mewed slightly and glanced at a watch which he pulled out of a coat pocket. “However, I’m sure that you would both like to see the happy mother. We’ve cleaned her up a bit: she was utterly filthy. I don’t believe she’s been properly scrubbed for a very long time. If you would both like to come with me, I’ll show you the girl, Una.”

The doctor stood up and we followed him through the large oak door and along a series of broad well-carpeted corridors lined with huge portraits of the King and rather fewer of his regal predecessors. His path led us eventually into a large room clearly put aside for medical services in which there were a number of hens and a young woman in a flimsy white dress making notes while reading figures from the colourful computer screens. Beneath a battery of dimmed lights and mechanical apparatus sat Una in the bed holding a pale blue baby in her arms and smiling at us wanly. Her hair had been washed and was now a very pale white, and her eyes sparkled a quite vapid blue. All the dirt had been taken from her face but nothing could disguise the painful thinness of it nor of her arms. She was wearing a plain white hospital gown, but most of her body was hidden under the bedsheets.

“It’s a boy!” she affirmed. “A little boy! Brown eyes just like his father. And *ever* so small! Just look at the tiny hands.”

The baby was clutching and unclutching his fists and looking around the room with utter incomprehension and curiosity. He wasn’t a very prepossessing sight: his neck barely seemed capable of supporting the weight of his head and his legs curved around in a small ball beneath him.

The young lady approached her, and took the child from her hands with a smile.

“We’d better tuck him up, don’t you think?” she remarked kindly. “He’s a bouncy little thing! Perhaps one day a man will come along into my life and I will have a beautiful boy like yours.” She looked at me. “Are you the father?”

“No, he isn’t!” snapped Beta jealously. “We don’t know who the father is.”

“Oh! I see,” the young lady replied frowning with a tone of implicit reproach,

turning around and delicately placing the child in a cot by the side of Una's bed. She smiled again at the new mother. "You can see the baby from here. He's provisionally named Number Nineteen, but I'm sure you'll want to give him a better name as soon as you can." She tucked the baby in under the sheets, and then hastened off out of the room, as did all the other medical staff, leaving us alone with just a hen sitting on a chair in the corner reading a newspaper.

"How was it? The birth, I mean?" Beta asked anxiously, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking one of Una's pale thin hands in her own. "The doctor said it was quite painful."

Una nodded. "It was certainly that! I thought it would *never* end! I thought I was going to die! Nobody ever told me that giving birth was as horrid as that. I'll never ever have a baby again. Not as long as I live! Even the painkillers they gave me hardly made any difference. But I'm sure that it was a better birth than it would have been had I been left in the street. I'm *so* grateful that you were able to persuade the Embassy to let me in." She glanced over at her baby whose eyes were closed and looked content in the cot. "And now I'm a mother. I don't know whether I should be happy or what I should feel. I mostly just feel relieved that it's over. You can't believe how much this pregnancy has worried me. I was *so* utterly distressed. Out in the streets of the City, sleeping on rubbish, begging for a few guineas, trying to avoid harm. And now I'm here, in this beautiful room, looked after by all these doctors and nurses. I was even more worried when I saw that most of the nurses were hens. Surely they couldn't understand human pregnancies. They lay eggs, don't they? But the midwife was that woman who was here, though why she's working amongst all these Cats and Hens I don't know. But she was able to make sure that I gave birth all right.

She kept me pushing and pushing, until my baby, Number Nineteen, came out covered in slime and with that long cord dangling from his belly button and leading into my very stomach.”

“But at least it’s over now!” Beta said reassuringly, squeezing Una’s hand tightly.

“That part’s over, maybe. But now I’ve got to be a mother. And a mother without a home, without a hope and nowhere to go!”

Una looked down at her stomach with a deep sigh and smiled grimly. She and Beta held hands in silence for several minutes, while I hovered about in the background looking at Una’s sleeping baby with some discomfort. He seemed so helpless and pitiful, his little fists clutched in front of him and his body forming such a small bulge under the blankets.

“We’ve assigned a room to you two,” suddenly announced a white Cat in a long black coat reaching to his ankles and his face obscured by a large black floppy hat who came into the room carrying a clipboard. “It’s just along the corridor. Shall I show it to you?”

His request seemed more like an order than a request, so Beta and I bid Una farewell and followed the Cat to a large room dominated by a four-poster double bed. The room was extremely well-furnished and clearly intended for people used to rather more luxury than were either of us. There were several portraits of the King on the walls, and a television which featured film of the King and various other well-appointed Cats in an incomprehensible ceremony involving a curious array of sharp instruments and some unidentifiable meat. However, the aspect of the room which most attracted Beta was the gleaming porcelain of the *en suite* bathroom, to which she

retreated as soon as the Cat had left.

I sat on the bed revelling in its comfort and contemplating the events of the day, while Beta could be heard splashing around furiously in the bath, cleansing herself of the filth of two days wandering the City and two nights sleeping rough. Despite the luxury of the surroundings and my anticipation of the pleasures of the night ahead, my thoughts were troubled by reflections of my continued search for the Truth and my return to the Suburbs, where I would once again be in a much more familiar, and, I imagined, more predictable, milieu.

20

“Una must be wondering where we are,” remarked Beta as she lay on the bed, my arm around her shoulders and traces of sweat still pasted to her brow. “We must see how she is.”

“Must we?” I asked reluctantly. I’d become very comfortable on the bed, lying so close to Beta’s warm naked body in the bedroom’s luxurious surroundings.

“Yes, we must!” said Beta firmly, snatching herself from my arm and standing up by the side of the four-poster bed. “Get your clothes on, and we’ll go and see her. She’s just down the corridor!”

I did as I was told and followed Beta as she padded along the thick carpeted corridor past the large portraits and paintings to Una’s room. It was opposite a splendid portrait of the King holding a pair of scales and sword, presumably showing him as the source of Justice in his Kingdom. We gingerly eased open the door to see Una very much awake, and chatting idly to the Hen who was still sitting there. She smiled as she saw us enter. Beta rushed to her side, and I sat on a chair just by the bed next to the cot where her baby was sleeping.

“How are you feeling?” Beta asked with some concern. “Better I hope?”

Una nodded. “I feel so battered and torn. As if my entire insides were pulled out of me. Which I suppose they have been. He’s still sleeping isn’t he? The baby, I mean.”

“He looks like nothing could ever wake him up,” I commented, glancing at the small blue huddle, his fists close to his face, breathing softly and slowly.

“It’s so difficult to believe I’m a mother now. What will people in Unity think of me now I wonder? Or Rupert as it’s now been renamed. Perhaps they’ll treat me better. I can just hope.”

“What’s your home town like?” wondered Beta, sitting on the edge of the bed and grasping Una’s hand in her own. “It’s in the Country isn’t it?”

“Yes. Leagues away. It was a long and arduous journey from there to the City. It’s quite an ordinary town, I suppose. Nothing very unusual about it to look at. There’s a town hall, plenty of churches, a cinema, a few supermarkets and a lot of countryside surrounding it. If you visited it, you’d probably not come away with any great impressions, although of course there are some old buildings and a nice cobbled square to remind you of its long glorious history. I believe there’d been some sort of battle fought there, years ago. The Battle of Unity. It was rather important I think in deciding the political structure of the country. But it’s very different from the City, and not just because it’s such a smaller place. It’s a lot less liberal. There’s no homosexuality, no pornography, no alcohol and no football. All those things have been banned in the town as a result of legislation passed absolutely hundreds of years ago, by different complexions of local government. And even though nobody really knows why they were made illegal, nobody’s ever thought of changing it. Or those who have probably just left the town to live somewhere else. So, it’s a quite dull place to live in, but quite peaceful as well. There’s none of the crime and violence you find in the City.”

“Did you enjoy living there?” asked Beta to encourage Una to keep her thoughts off her present predicament.

“No. Not really. I always wanted to leave. Like most people, I suppose. But

there *are* jobs there in local businesses and factories, so I suppose many just stay there for the work. I thought it was really boring. And quite oppressive really. Like most parents in Unity, mine were very strict, and there wasn't a great deal I was allowed to do. Seeing boys for instance was very much discouraged. My father works in the courts. He's some kind of solicitor, and well respected in the community. My mother works part-time in a factory where she weighs chickens before sealing them in plastic and then attaching labels. They wanted me to grow up a respectable girl: not the slut they think I've become. They had no sympathy at all when I ever suggested I might like to leave Unity and live anywhere else. Like most people in the town they believe that the world beyond is a kind of bedlam of alcoholics, drug takers, prostitutes and criminals. And after having lived in the City for so long, without a home and in the gutter, I can't say that their fears were wholly unfounded.

“Most people, whether girls or boys, have to serve in the local militia for a year when they leave school. I've no idea why. Unity isn't at risk from invasion from any other town, and most districts of this country don't find the need for such an obligation. I've been fortunate not to have had to do that. All that parading and marching and physical exercise. Standing out in the town square for hours, whatever the weather, and costing the town I don't know how much to have a disciplined force of adolescents who do nothing more constructive than build irrigation trenches, gather in harvests and guard the town hall from imaginary enemies. As a girl, I wouldn't even have had the relative fun of learning how to use guns or to fight. I would have been expected to prepare meals, make beds and wash clothes. It was not something I was at all looking forward to: and I'd long ago resolved to leave Unity before I was called up. As I have. But not at all in the way I'd have chosen.

“However, it makes some strange sense in Unity. Everything is so well regulated. Even without the national service, it’s almost a military regime. School was just the same. These horrid tight uniforms I had to wear from the moment I started at primary school. You didn’t wear a school uniform, did you?”

Beta shook her head. “No. I didn’t have to wear anything at school. And neither did the teachers.”

“Your village must be a lot more liberal than Unity, I can see that. My uniform was an ankle length skirt and a blouse with a high collar which almost strangled me. And it had to be *very* hot for us to be allowed to take off our jackets. We had to wear these ugly hats, the same colour as our uniforms, which covered everything but our plaits. The boys had to wear uniforms as well, but theirs weren’t nearly so tight or restrictive as the girls’. We had an hour of assembly every morning, where we had to endure a moral sermon. When I was first at school, this would have been a Church of Unity sermon, but now it would be something to do with Illicitism. No other religions were permitted in the town besides the Church of Unity which had been founded by some really puritanical people hundreds of years ago. Often, the school sermons were nothing more than an excuse to damn all the other religions and faiths. Part of the doctrine was that only people in the true church had any chance of salvation in the day of Judgement, and that God had already decided whether we were to be saved at the moment of our Conception. This meant that the whole process of family planning was horribly complicated and involved the active blessing of a minister from the Church. It was a wonder anyone ever had any children at all.

“There were several hours of physical education every day, much of which took place after hours. I hated that. My Sports Master, a large cockerel with a wooden

leg, was quite savage with those he thought were shirking. And that more often than not was me. I'd be slapped with a clout from his heavy wing if he saw me showing less enthusiasm than I ought as I fell over in the mud while playing hockey or girls rugby. He wasn't the worst by any means. The Moral Standards teacher was particularly fierce and rather sadistic. And the Physics teacher was always scathingly sarcastic if I made a mistake, which I often did. I was really no scientist, and I showed no inclination to ever be one."

"You seemed to have had a fairly dismal education," I remarked.

"Wasn't there anything at school you actually enjoyed?" wondered Beta.

"I enjoyed Art. I was quite a good artist, I think. It was the subject in which I most excelled. And our Art teacher was very sympathetic. She was quite unconventional by Unity standards, though she'd probably seem extremely conservative in the City. She wore pretty silk scarves and let her hair hang loose. Most of the teachers actively disapproved of her, and I imagine the parents did as well. She gave me a lot of encouragement. Even giving up some of her free time to help me in any painting or sculpture I was working at. It was when I was being creative I felt most fulfilled. It allowed a release which was mostly suppressed in every other activity.

"The school had very strict rules on the kind of Art we could be exposed to or work on. It had to be one of sculpture, painting or drawing, and it had to be representational. Only people, plants, objects and sceneries were permitted. Abstract expressionism, collage, surrealism, impressionism and the use of other materials were expressly banned. It was also expected to be celebratory of life as it was in Unity, and never even implicitly critical of it. My fairly negative views confronted my teacher with a dilemma. She was obliged to ensure that my portraits displayed expressions of

proprietary and dignity appropriate to the status of whoever I was portraying and to suppress any experimentation in content or materials. But when we were alone together she showed me pictures of the more modern art you can find in the City and in the Art Gallery just outside the Suburbs. It was a revelation to me to see sculptures that hinted at physical reality, rather than explicitly expressing it. Paintings that made no attempt to represent photographic reality. Art that used found materials, technology and industrial detritus. And Art that dealt with political and social issues, that showed naked bodies, that depicted aspects of the world in its less salubrious aspects. At first, I was baffled. How could this be Art? I asked myself. But I had somehow opened a door of opportunity and æsthetic expression I'd just never suspected was possible, which seemed somehow much more profound than what I had previously known, and there was no way to close that door. I worked privately on my own pieces, using modern techniques to express myself, but I had to hide them from everyone, including my teacher and most especially my parents.

“They were not keen on my enthusiasm for Art. They considered it a waste of time and effort. Anything of no apparent utility was anathema to them. In fact, they were quite angry when they learnt of my ambition to leave Unity and attend Art School in Lambdeth. This embodied two sins for them, both contemptible: the pursuit of vain worthless endeavour and exposure to the sinful world beyond Unity's borough boundaries. They didn't actually forbid me from studying Art at school: its only virtue in their eyes was that it was the sole subject in which I excelled and could help me graduate from school with sufficiently high grades to be a satisfactory marriageable proposition. However, they did coax me to take a more active interest in science and mathematics. These were worthwhile pursuits as they were so evidently to do with the

real world.”

“Didn’t you enjoy science?” Beta asked.

“Not at all. Even though I studied them diligently. The way they were taught was so joyless. It was all equations, laws and facts. It was a process of learning how something was meant to be according to a stated axiom, how it was expressed according to a particular equation and then solved by a neat juggling of figures. Specific gravities. Integrals of parabolic curves. Enzymes and subcutaneous fat. It all seemed so dull and boring. It also seemed so remote from the real world, even though that was exactly what it was supposed to be about. All those strange elements with horrible smells in laboratories. All those measurements of what was supposed to happen which were always wrong, however accurate the measurements, if they contradicted the calculated result. I just couldn’t relate to it at all.

“I much preferred going to the cinema or theatre than studying science. There was only one cinema in Unity, and plays were only staged occasionally at the theatre which was mostly used for functions. I know now how very limited was the selection of plays and films permitted in Unity, but they seemed relatively adventurous at the time. They presented a doorway to the world beyond Unity. A doorway most definitely not present on local television and radio. The world beyond seemed so exciting: full of opportunity and promise. And throughout my adolescence that was where I wanted to be. Anywhere in fact than Unity.”

“Did you have any friends at school who shared your views?” Beta wondered.

“I had very few friends. We were supposed to report any antisocial behaviour or persuasions, and so it was very difficult to make friends in the way which is so natural and ordinary here in the City. This was further complicated by all the political

changes that were taking place in Unity.”

“Political changes?” I asked.

“Yes. The way the Illicit Party took power in Unity. In fact it’s not even called Unity any more, though I find it really difficult to think of it by its new name of Rupert.”

“Rupert? But I was in a place called Rupert just a few days ago where I saw the President Chairman address a rally. Was that the same place?”

“I suppose it could have been. But then there are so many towns, villages and boroughs called Rupert now, it’s very likely it was somewhere quite different. Was it a very hilly district, surrounded by forestry and an enormous lake?”

“I didn’t see any hills,” I admitted. “It was very flat open countryside.”

“Then it must have been a different Rupert. It seems every place that has adopted an Illicit local government has honoured the President Chairman by naming itself after him. It seems odd to me that anywhere would choose to name itself after a foreign marsupial dictator, but then I never really warmed to Illiberal Socialism. In fact, I just don’t understand it at all. The Illicit Party didn’t take power suddenly. It was originally banned, along with the Red and Green Parties, but a few Blue Party councillors converted to Illicitism, claiming that the policies of their original allegiance didn’t really represent their ideals or those pursued in Unity. Being in the majority group of the council with the White Party, they unbanned the Illicit Party, and exerted pressure to ban the Black Party which represented the local opposition. Then some of the Black Party candidates converted to the Illicit Party, and the White Party councillors found that they were no longer members of the leading group. They became the official opposition, which they remained until they too were banned and

physically expelled from the town.

“At first the change of local government made little difference. After all, everyone in Unity was a member of the Church of Unity, and the council’s policies were fairly consistent with that. There were some changes. A Rupert Youth group was formed and a lot of my fellow pupils joined it. They began wearing dark green overalls, Illicit Party armbands and Rupert badges on their breast. Although, it contravened the strict school uniform rules, the authorities found that enforcement of the policy for these individuals was quite impossible, as so many teachers and parents themselves started wearing Rupert suits. And, of course, the fact that the Rupert Youth could wear different clothes encouraged others to join. Pictures of Chairman President Rupert began appearing everywhere, and, bit by bit, more and more streets, buildings and institutions renamed themselves after Rupert and the causes of the Illicit Party.

“The local government instituted all sorts of apparently popular new decrees. The Illicit Party struck a very sympathetic chord in the people of Unity, even though no one ever seemed sure what it really represented. At first, we were told that Illiberal Socialism was merely the political expression of the Church of Unity, but if this was so why did the council close the churches, ban religious assembly and order the burning of all bibles, hymnals and prayer books? The object of morning assembly seamlessly mutated from the affirmation of faith to the promulgation of political propaganda. A Party official, a tall Rooster whom nobody had ever seen before, would strut and rant on the school stage, inciting us to shout our praises of Rupert and his causes. Political education classes became compulsory, where we had to read the **Illiberal Socialist Worker Daily** and digest long dull and impenetrable articles, which seemed to be full of the most ridiculous contradictions and assertions. Cinema and television now only

showed films imported from the Illiberal Socialist Republics which were either very violent and vindictive or horribly dull.

“The other pupils seemed to love all this stuff, and I felt increasingly isolated. I was picked on for my lack of devotion to the Illiberal Socialist cause, and soon, like everyone else, I had to adopt a Rupert suit myself. At first, it was quite liberating to wear these baggy loose-fitting overalls, but it was just one uniform replacing another, with the difference being that it was unwise to wear anything else even when not at school. The curriculum was modified to reflect the change of government and Art classes were now made even more restrictive. The only acceptable subject was the portrayal of President Chairman Rupert and the only criterion of excellence was how noble, gracious, wise and virtuous the depiction. If you’ve ever tried painting or drawing a koala you’ll know that this isn’t the easiest task in the world. The most popular pose, and the one we were most encouraged to depict, was of Rupert gesturing into the mid-distance, his chin slightly raised, surrounded by admiring followers in standard issue Rupert suits.”

“Didn’t anyone dissent against all this?” Beta asked.

“Yes. Some. Not many. They were either expelled or incarcerated. At the very least they could expect to lose their jobs. Worryingly, the definition of dissent kept changing. At first it meant demonstrations, protests or circulating seditious material. Later it came to include not wearing a Rupert badge; not hanging a portrait of the President Chairman in the house; reading or owning proscribed literature and not remembering the lyrics of **In Praise of Rupert and the Truth**. Most people were either active in the Illicit Party or were applying for membership: an honour which became more elusive as demand for it grew. Those who were Illicit Party members had

all sorts of privileges and responsibilities denied to everyone else, and so everyone wanted to join.

“I didn’t like Illicit Party members at all. They were never anyone I liked. In fact, the party consisted mostly of bullies or conformists or just the horribly petty. These are probably the very attributes the party most likes and I was sure that my application for membership was doomed from the very start. In any case, I only applied on my parents’ insistence as they were worried that otherwise I might be denied the benefits of a good education. My father told me bluntly he didn’t want any daughter of his to be thought unworthy of the privilege. So every day after school, I obediently attended these tedious meetings where we were favoured with extra indoctrination, and allocated all the boring messy jobs that those who were already Party members didn’t have to do any more. Putting up posters. Selling copies of **The Illiberal Socialist Workers Daily** and **The Truth**. Collecting funds door to door.

“Paul, my *mentor*, as he was called, was a tall, not unhandsome, boy from the year above me, whose wealthy parents had made their fortunes from the egg retail industry. He seemed rather more pleasant than the other Illicit Party mentors, and I considered myself very lucky in having him rather than the others. He smiled readily and sometimes made jokes about the Illicit Party which were very nearly disloyal. He subscribed enthusiastically to the Illicit Party’s views on Cats, Communists, sexual deviants and modern artists, believing that they should all be strung up and tortured. Indeed, one of his less engaging features was his tendency to detail exactly what horrible torments he would be quite happy to administer himself, if need be, on such reprobates. He relished the power his Illicit Party membership had given him, and was quite immodest regarding his conquests of women.

“I soon very much regretted having him as my mentor as his sexual ambitions became more obvious and he expressed them more forcefully. He told me of the various girls he’d made love to, what they had done and how good it had been. I wasn’t at all interested. I had very definite principles regarding relationships and I didn’t want to be considered just a casual lay. I had been inculcated that any sexual liaison outside of legal matrimony was *prima facie* wrong and fully justified the rather severe sentences that Unity (and now Rupert) attached to the crime. I also knew that it was always the woman rather than the man who would be regarded as the erring partner. He was very insistent however. He made plain that my likelihood of becoming a Party member was very much contingent on satisfying his desires. He variously accused me of being frigid, sexless and a bitch. He told me that women were devised to serve men’s desires and that my reluctance showed that I had none of the qualities demanded of members of the Illicit Party. I had never read or heard anything relating to Illiberal Socialism that said that women were obliged to have sex with men whenever it was demanded, but he dismissed this. It was obvious, he said, that I hadn’t gained a proper understanding of the spirit of the ideology or mastered its more intricate interpretations.

“After a while, he seemed to lose interest in me, having started a relationship with another Party member also blessed with relatively wealthy parents, and who was also one of the most strict and doctrinaire of the female party members. I sometimes speculated whether she permitted Paul the carnal satisfaction he believed was his right, but if ever anyone gave the impression of being frigid it was she.

“One night, after school, he told me to come with him in his car to an outlying district of the borough where there was a perceived need for more posters. He packed

the car with piles of posters with Rupert's face and single word captions like **Justice**, **Plenty** and, strangely, **Unity**. I had no reason to suspect his motives. I had often been in his car before, as had his other party applicants. He always enjoyed showing off his affluence and hated walking. We were soon out of the town, and up in the hills. I had no idea where this village was, but in a vague way I had been looking forward to the journey, as I had so rarely been out there by car. I was a little worried when, high up the hill and far away from the town or, indeed, any village, he slowed the car and pulled it into a layby. And then, it was there, in the evening air, with the sound of frogs chirruping in a nearby brook, and with no one to hear my screams that he ..."

Una abruptly stopped. A tear was dripping down her cheek, and her eyes stared out in horror.

Beta squeezed Una's hand and smiled kindly. "You don't have to go on, you know. Not if you don't want to."

Una shook her head, squeezed her eyes tight, but more tears squeezed free. "Paul is my baby's father. He forced himself on me. He slapped me when I resisted. He pushed himself on top and tore off my clothes. He ripped them into rags. He pushed his way into me. Brutally. Savagely. It was loathsome. It was painful. I hated him. I hated it. I shouted. I struggled. And then it was to no avail. Nothing more could be done. It was over. He got dressed and while I was crying and sobbing, he got back into his car and drove away. Not that I would have contemplated ... ever ... whatever the distance home ... ever getting in that car with him again!"

Una paused as more tears streamed down her cheeks while Beta silently comforted her by squeezing her hands in her own. Beta was clearly appalled by Una's account, but was unable to say anything which could properly express her feelings.

“It must have been the worst day of your life.”

“And so it was. Up until then! I just lay in the grass out of sight of the road for I don’t know how long, numbed and soiled. Eventually, probably because it was getting quite cool, I picked myself up and spent a futile twenty minutes looking for my knickers which Paul had ripped off, but they were nowhere to be found. I had the distressing fantasy that Paul had kept them as a souvenir of his conquest. My clothes were in a terrible state. He’d torn the fabric quite badly, and however hard I tried I couldn’t recover my modesty at all. The front kept falling down. But in a sense I didn’t care. I was so defiled that modesty seemed an unnecessary luxury.

“I walked along the road not knowing where I was going, and with no thought of a destination. It was dark, lit only by the stars and the crescent moon, and only the occasional headlamps of cars illuminated the road. I walked and walked, muttering to myself constantly, cursing Paul, cursing the Illicit Party and cursing myself. I don’t know how long I’d been walking. Hours maybe. Paul had taken me to a very remote part of the countryside. There were fields, hen coops and stretches of road spookily overshadowed by trees.

“I passed several houses, farms and cottages, wondering whether to knock on the door and plea for assistance. I recognised that at some stage I’d have to do this if I were ever going to find my way home. But they were all so forbidding and I was so frightened of what they would think of me in my state of distress and immodesty. Eventually I decided to take the chance and approached a small house, isolated in the hills, and one of the few not named after Rupert or one of the Illicit Party icons. I think it might have been called **Rose Cottage** or something else relatively harmless. There were lights on, shining through the curtains and illuminating the flowerbeds outside. I

hesitated on the doorstep for many minutes, and then with a burst of reckless courage I pressed the doorbell and waited for a reply.

“One came fairly soon, from a man in his thirties who I was pleased to see was not wearing a Rupert suit (quite an unusual sight by then). He looked at me with a puzzled expression while I stared at him totally unprepared for what to say. I had somehow imagined that I would know instinctively. It was obvious to him that something was wrong, but he was also not sure how to respond. At last, he asked: ‘How can we help you?’ on which cue I burst into tears and blubbered incoherently.

“‘You better come inside,’ he remarked kindly, opening the door wider and letting me enter. A woman in a loose flowery dress (another rare sight) appeared in the hallway and, after scanning me, asked the man: ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ The two of them started discussing me, as I tried as best I could to cover my breasts with rags of Rupert suit that stubbornly refused to stay in place. At last she announced: ‘Well, she can’t just stay here!’ and I was escorted into their living room and sat down on an old armchair just by the unlit fireplace. I looked blankly around me, just happy to be out of the evening chill and to be with sympathetic people, however unconventionally dressed.

“I gradually became aware of my surroundings. The pictures of landscapes, the photographs of exotic places and a refreshing lack of portraits of Rupert. The couple who owned the cottage sat down on their sofa, and I observed for the first time a third person standing by a book case and looking at the pages of a book which did not have the ubiquitous dark green binding of Illicit Party literature. I’d never seen a woman like her before, though of course she wouldn’t look at all out of place in the City, nor indeed in most of the country. She was a black girl, in itself unusual, with an enormous

mass of black curly hair, wearing very tight shorts and a brief singlet which revealed the whole of her navel and the curves of her waist. She was a friend of the couple who owned the cottage, she came from Lambdeth and her name was Anna...”

“Anna!” I exclaimed. “Is it the same Anna? The one I was with two nights ago, Beta?”

My companion frowned. “If it is, she’s certainly changed her appearance.”

“That would be entirely consistent.”

“Do you know her, then?” Una asked, bewildered. “How strange! She was the first person I’d ever met from outside Unity. She was *so* unconventional and her attitudes *so* liberating and refreshing. Her language was peppered with expressions I’d never heard before and she had an air of self-confidence women in Unity just never have. She put down the book on Law and the Modern Fowl, and approached me. She asked me questions sympathetically but very bluntly, and very soon pieced together what had happened to me. ‘You poor girl!’ she said again and again. ‘How absolutely jolly horrid it must have been!’

“She managed to steer conversation away from my predicament and talked about life in Lambdeth and how different it was in Unity. It was odd to hear opinions about Unity, and the Illiberal Socialist government, and the way things were done, that were so unashamedly critical and also so much in accordance with my own. I felt a kind of liberation in all my misery. There *were* other ways of seeing and doing things, and there *were* places where this was normal. I giggled at her disrespectful comments on President Chairman Rupert and how ridiculous the koala looked with his grandiose gestures, his ankle length overcoats and his broad hat. She made sarcastic comments about Illiberal Socialism: how it never seemed to be sure if it was right, left or centre,

but was always authoritarian and dogmatic. The couple nodded in agreement with her, and I became aware that I had somehow stumbled across a house of covert dissidents who I'd always been told were the most abominable and despicable of all people.

"I also noticed that they were sipping a strange clear liquid from curiously delicate glasses and that an open bottle of the substance was sitting on the table. I associated it with the strange smell on Anna's breath, and felt a frisson of wickedness as I realised that they were partaking in illegal substances: in this case, white wine. I had learnt that alcohol caused people to behave in the most frightful and violent ways, but my hosts seemed nothing but wholly civilised.

"I was beginning to relax, when the doorbell rang. The man stood up, quite startled. He anxiously hid the bottle of wine in a cupboard. He and his wife then went into the hallway, closing the door behind them. Anna stayed with me, holding my hands in hers, occasionally stroking them. 'I wonder who it could be at this time of night? More visitors, perhaps?' she mused. The door reopened and the woman appeared again, looking rather agitated. 'It's the police!' She whispered firmly. 'They'd been informed that a partly naked woman had been seen walking the road near here and they're asking everyone what they know anything about it. But then they saw that Jacob and I aren't wearing Rupert suits, and don't have a picture of the koala in the hallway, and now they're asking all sorts of questions...'

"The door opened again, and the man entered rather sheepishly with three police officers, one of which was a Rooster. The rest was just an unremitting nightmare. They identified me as the woman who'd been immodestly dressed and I was immediately arrested for indecency and, more seriously, disrespect to the Illicit Party for allowing my Rupert suit to get into such disrepair and losing my arm band.

The couple owning the house were arrested for being revolutionary seditionaries, alcohol traffickers, possessors of illegal literature, and a whole host of other crimes, - some of which seemed to be based more on idle fantasy than from any evidence that I could see. They were even charged with having encouraged me to dress immodestly. Anna was also arrested, but as she came from Lambdeth even the police decided it was futile to press too many charges, although they were very rude and abusive to her.

“From then on, the nightmare just deepened. Anna was expelled. The couple who owned the cottage were put on trial for a preposterous litany of crimes. And I ... I was totally humiliated. I wasn't likely to be executed, as seemed quite likely for Jacob and his wife, but the crimes I'd been found guilty of just seemed to pile on me. I was guilty of association with seditionaries, use of alcohol, promiscuity and indecency. Then, while imprisoned in a police cell with a woman accused of adultery, and denying it vehemently, other charges were directed at me. Paul gave evidence of my promiscuity and of my shamelessness in seducing him away from his betrothed for the satisfaction of my base lustful cravings. His fiancée even came into my cell for the sole purpose of spitting in my face. Pupils from my school gave evidence of my anti-social views and my lack of enthusiasm for the cause of Illiberal Socialism. I was supposed to have been stirring dissent amongst my fellows. My paintings, drawings and sculptures were deemed proof of a seditious and unacceptable disposition. Not only those I had done before the town had converted to Illiberal Socialism, but even those since. I had failed to portray the high standards of propriety and dignity associated with the great President Chairman. The fact that my Art teacher was now serving a jail sentence for distributing illegal literature and corrupting minors became evidence of how far from vindication I was.

“My parents were not at all supportive. My mother even said that she’d always suspected that I wasn’t worthy to be a daughter of her husband. She said some very hurtful things. This became particularly bad when I was not only diagnosed as no longer being a virgin - and therefore guilty of the crime of pre-marital sex - but also pregnant. My father slapped me forcefully on the face, cutting the inside of my cheeks against my teeth and making me spit out blood. My mother declared that my father and she had decided to disown me. ‘A slut like you can never truly be our daughter!’

“As a minor, I couldn’t be executed or imprisoned for my crimes. Being pregnant, I couldn’t be caned, lashed or put in the stocks. So at my trial a couple of months after I was arrested, the court reluctantly decided to expel me from the district of Rupert for the rest of my life: a punishment they believed severe enough for me to atone for the severity of my crimes. I stood in the dock, between two police officers, tears running down my cheeks from the humiliation of the horrid things that had been said about me, hardly hearing the actual sentence through a haze of fear and worry. The magistrate sat in his Rupert suit beneath an enormous portrait of the President Chairman, and gave a long and unflattering account of me and how I represented the kind of scum that the district had throughout its history tried to excise, and that my expulsion could only be welcomed by right-thinking townspeople. I gazed up at the idealised portrait of Rupert which depicted him holding a set of scales in which enemies of Illiberal Socialism such as Cats and Anarchists were shown tipping off and falling into what appeared to be the flames of hell. And it was to there that I felt I was now consigned!”

“And so that’s how you came to be in the City when we met you?” I asked.

“You had been expelled and you made your way there.”

“Yes. Where else could I go? I thought that here at least I could start a new life. But it wasn’t an easy journey from Unity. Quite a few hundred leagues separate the City from my home town, and I had very little money. In fact, I had nothing but the Rupert suit I was given to wear and some basic possessions: now long since stolen. I travelled by foot, by hitch-hiking and by clambering onto the wagons of freight trains. I lived by begging and very soon even had to sell my body just to have enough to eat. I travelled through many different boroughs: some much more friendly than others. I stayed for a month in Lambdeth, which gave me a foretaste of life in the City, and which compared to Unity seemed quite urban enough.

“By the time I’d reached the City I was quite noticeably pregnant, and I had already suffered more than I’d believed possible. I had slept in barns and deserted hen coops, often sharing with other animals usually much better prepared for sleeping rough than me. The only beds I slept in had been those of men who were paying to have sex with me, often quite perversely because I was pregnant, rather than despite it. I had lost and gained clothes and possessions. I was hungry, filthy and ragged. I had expected the City to be big, busy and full of buildings and monuments of splendour and size. I hadn’t expected so much poverty. When I had learnt that even the poorest people in the City earned thousands of guineas a week, I thought that everyone in the City was phenomenally rich, and hoped to gain some of this bounty. But I hadn’t realised just how very expensive the City is, and I soon came to learn that my pregnancy, my vagrancy and my lack of friends discriminated against me in the City just as much as it did everywhere else.

“For the wealthy, the employed and the tourist, there is much to recommend the City. It has none of the petty tyranny of Unity. People can say and do pretty much

what they like. For those like me, the City is sheer hell. I soon regretted coming here, but where else was I to go? At least I could beg and uncomfortable though they may be there are places to sleep at night where you risk assault, but are usually just left alone. The parts of the City I spent most of my time were not those that I would ever have chosen to visit as a tourist. I slept in derelict building sites, deserted houses, park benches and railway stations: often just to be evicted by police or by those who reckoned they had better rights to sleep there than me.

“I learnt about aspects of the City no one had ever told me about. The crime and violence. The gang warfare between the different species. Bird against reptile. Rooster against Sparrow. I learnt to identify which districts were effectively out of bounds to humans like me. Districts where it is dangerous to walk at any time of night and day. Districts where there is casual violence and gang warfare. Districts as small as a block or as large as a whole borough. There have been nights where I’ve sheltered behind cars as gangs fought with machetes, submachine guns and flick-knives causing unspeakable harm to each other. I’ve seen people killed. Sometimes suddenly in a blaze of gunfire: often randomly directed at a street full of people presumably in retribution for similar horrors against the perpetrators. Sometimes slowly in horrifying agony: screams echoing around the streets and people walking by not wishing to look too closely in case they too attract attention.

“The violence became worse the closer it came to the General Election. There are many gangs who have adopted political allegiance to one party or another. There are gangs which support the Black Party. They dress in black, often in leather, and direct their hatred against particular species, particularly Cats, and more often other races of the same species. The hatred expressed by spaniels towards terriers, white

humans against brown ones, mustangs against ponies: it's senseless and obscene. There are gangs which support the Red Party, the Blue Party, even the White and Green Parties. I don't believe the gangs even know or care what the political parties they supposedly support actually represent. They're just another badge of membership to set themselves apart from other gangs.

"What horrified me most, however, was how so many gangs now seem to support the Illicit Party. And these are the gangs which seem to be the most violent, the most well armed and the best organised. How did that happen? And do any of them have any idea what it would be like for them to actually live in an Illiberal Socialist society? I soon came to fear the Illicit Party gangs more than the others. They were the ones who clung most jealously to their territories, who would be most likely to organise political demonstrations and who soon became most famous for their use of grenades, mortar bombs and semtex. In one case I heard of, but thankfully never saw, an Illicit gang managed to invade a Red Party gang stronghold, and, unlike the usual practise of a symbolic victory marked by a few murders and a quick retreat, they methodically massacred every single member of that gang, apparently using some pretty horrible methods of torture not to gain information but simply to inspire terror and what they call *respect*."

"That sounds horrible!" gasped Beta. "Don't the police do anything to stop it?"

"They're mostly totally impotent. And they're pretty corrupt as well: often themselves involved in the organised crime that goes on in the City. I never got involved in gangs at all. I'm a foreigner to the City. Gangs only recruit from amongst those who're born here. It's safer for them. But I've suffered from the crime. I've had everything I've had stolen not once but several times. Whenever I have anything, it

gets stolen! I've been attacked - totally randomly and with no provocation. I've been raped several times. My pregnancy has been no defence at all from any kind of abuse. I have lived a life of begging, prostitution and even petty theft. I have been maltreated, abused and threatened. The City is most definitely not paved with gold. I've only known the very occasional guinea that gets dropped onto the cracked and shit-covered pavements. The City has not been kind to me, and I cannot be expected to be kind about it!"

"...And then we met you!" smiled Beta with as much reassurance as she could. "But surely we haven't been the first people who've shown you kindness?"

"No. You haven't. I've met many kind people. Not just those who throw me money as I beg: even some of those who have paid for my sexual services haven't been too ungenerous. There have been people who have extended a helping hand. Given me a hostel bed for the night. Given me money. Just taken the time to speak to me. Helped me after I've been beaten or raped. Enough people to remind me that kindness and goodness exists everywhere. But what can they do? They can't afford to help me for very long. They haven't the money or resources."

"But Lord Arthur has the resources and power. He helped you," Beta reminded Una.

"Lord Arthur? The enormous lion? Well, yes, he did help me. He took me away with him on his back out of the park where we met him into the wide streets of the City. That would probably have been fun for me if I'd have been in a fit state to appreciate it. People and cars just parted like waves to let him pass as he strode carefully along the avenues to the hotel where he was staying. And a very impressive hotel it was too. I'd often passed hotels like this in my wanders. I may even have

raided the waste bins of that very one. Towering high above everything: enormous suites and servants everywhere. The furnishings were gilt and sparkling. The carpet was piled high in luxury. As we entered the hotel foyer, we were descended upon by countless minions who attended to Lord Arthur and on his instructions whisked me off with great care and attention to his hotel suite, high above the City. The maids were most solicitous of my health and it seemed they couldn't do enough to help me and make me as comfortable as they could. I was fed with a very full and appetising meal, which was fortunately not too rich for my weakened state, my body was cleaned and my filthy, fusty clothes were replaced by crisp clean laundry-smelling ones.

"I was laid in a large double poster bed: the most comfortable bed I had ever been in and incredibly welcome after so many months of sleeping on the hard pavement surface. The room was especially large to accommodate the lion. The room was as large as one of those in an art gallery: able to allow Lord Arthur space to pace back and forth in front of the wide windows while talking to himself and barking out instructions to the maids. He promised me so much. He said he would get expert attention to ease my pregnancy. He said he would see that I would have a home to stay in after I had given birth. He said that he would atone for his neglect of the poor and needy by treating me in a way that would compensate for the many millions of lives he had directly or indirectly ruined.

"Most of all, however, he spoke about himself. And most of what he said was rambling, incoherent and quite clearly not said with me as the listener in mind. He cursed the Red Party for coming into power. He cursed the banks for not extending his credit when he needed it most. He cursed his advisers. He cursed himself. As he droned on and on, I dozed off to sleep, occasionally awakened by a growl or a

subdued roar. Even in all that opulent splendour, my chief concern was for my baby and the occasional pain it caused me as he struggled inside me.

“I never spoke to the lion again. My afternoon and night alternated between deep and fitful sleep. Sometimes I was awake for long enough to see if it was day or night. The tall buildings of the City surrounding the hotel seemed much less forbidding now that I was elevated so high above the streets. I saw them lit by the high afternoon sun, and then, seemingly not long after, they were looming shadows lit by rectangles of lighted windows. It was then that I realised I was again sharing the room with Lord Arthur who was stretched out on the hotel floor, almost like an enormous kitten and not nearly as formidable as when he was awake. I smiled to myself, content that I was secure, and slept soundly until late this morning.

“However, I was misled. I wasn’t going to become Lord Arthur’s charitable concern. I was woken, not as I’d hoped by the sound of one of the maids in a smart apron and hat carrying a breakfast tray, but by very rough shakes and the unsympathetic: ‘Wake up, you slut! Wake up! It’s time you cleared out of the room!’

“I opened my eyes to look at a stern tall Rooster in a uniform surrounded by some rather threatening uniformed staff. ‘Wassat?’ I asked, not really believing the dramatic change of treatment from the day before. ‘Where’s Lord Arthur?’“

““He’s gone! And so’s his credit! He’s not paid for the room and not likely to do so either. You can’t pay for him, can you?’

“I shook my head. I had nothing. I was pushed out of bed and only allowed enough time to get some clothes on before being roughly escorted down the back stairs reserved for servants, and out by the rear entrance into an alleyway of rubbish bins and wastepaper, just between the hotel and some law courts. The staff who

escorted me, carrying me off the ground by my shoulders and only just mindful of my pregnancy, showed very little of the respect and courtesy the staff had expressed the previous day. They didn't disguise any of their contempt for the 'pathetic old bankrupt' they considered Lord Arthur to be. I came to realise that they considered me to be some kind of whore that the lion had brought into his room for some perverse sexual activity, and that they had seen enough of this kind of activity not to consider it at all unusual, even if it didn't soften their disgust for it.

"So, I was back in the streets. My baby was kicking me from inside. And the City was just crowding in on me. All I wanted was somewhere to rest, but wherever I went was wrong. I was always pushed on by someone or something. And I suppose that's how I came to be in the Ambassadorial district when you met me. I've no idea how I got there! I was in such a haze! Everything was so unreal! The only thing I knew was the pain I was in!"

"But you're here now!" said Beta comfortingly. "You're safe and sound! All you need now is to go to sleep and rest. Everything will be all right."

"I hope so!" exclaimed Una, desperate to believe Beta. "I *do* hope so! I would so like my baby's first days to be ones of comfort and security." She raised her head and glanced at her child asleep in a pose of utter abandon. "I hope that after all I have been through there will yet be a happy resolution!"

21

Physically, Beta and I were much more refreshed after our good night sleep in a bed, but the benefits of that slowly dissipated as we stood for over an hour at the slip road to the busy motorway junction not far from the embassies. Our thumbs hopefully gestured at the cars and lorries as they sped by, but none showed us any sympathy.

“How much longer must we wait?” sighed Beta plaintively. “Surely one of these hundreds of cars must stop!”

A car trundled by slowly, looking likely to stop, but it drove by loaded down by the luggage piled high on its roof. A van covered with Illicit Party slogans shot by, its occupants sticking their heads out of the window to jeer and gesture rudely at us. Beyond the slip road was a vast junction of roads where cars and trucks hurtled along totally oblivious to our presence.

Then, just as hope was diminishing to its lowest ebb, an extremely long stretch limousine, which had just sped by, suddenly stopped and parked on the hard shoulder a furlong ahead of us. It was driven by an alsatian with a peaked cap and uniform. The door opened slowly and the monstrous form of Hubert emerged rearwards, still in his enormous overcoat. He urgently beckoned us, and we obediently ran towards him.

“I thought it might have been you!” he remarked. “I had just about time to tell the chauffeur to stop. Where are you heading?”

“The Suburbs!” I said breathlessly.

“Back home again. And with your young ladyfriend. So you’ve been persuaded by that Rupert chap that that’s where you’ll find the Truth! My friends aren’t quite

going that far, but I think we'll be able to take you some of the way. Get in the car!"

We needed little prompting, and followed Hubert into the limousine. However large it had appeared from the outside, it seemed even larger inside. Large enough indeed to accommodate a rhinoceros, a hippopotamus and a rather fat man in addition to Hubert and ourselves. The chauffeur turned his muzzle round to look at us, and seeing that the door was closed, he manoeuvred back on to the slip road.

"These are friends of mine I met in the City," Hubert announced to the company. "They're both good friends of Tudor, the chap I told you about."

The hippopotamus wore a tee-shirt that just about managed to cover most of her belly sporting the cryptic message **The Balance of Justice**, and a pair of floral shorts. The rhinoceros wore an open denim shirt, studded with buttons, and checked trousers. **The City** was written above the crown of the broad brimmed hat he wore. The man rested a camcorder on his bare hairy knees, and wore a striped shirt, shorts and a very similar hat sporting the words **I © Her Maphrodite**. He examined me steadily.

"Hey, don't I know you!" he announced. "The Suburbs ain't it? You gave me directions to the Centaur Hotel? Just a few days ago. You remember?"

I nodded, although it was difficult to recognise someone I'd met so briefly in the dark. "Yes, that was me."

The fat man grinned triumphantly: "This is the guy who gave us that map. We never stayed in the Centaur after all. A real tacky dive it was. We stayed in the Horse and Hounds, a real traditional place. My name's White and these are my pals Wayne and Wilma." The two pachyderms nodded their heads.

"The Suburbs?" Wayne, the rhinoceros, asked. "A real dead joint, that. We

ain't never going there again. But you're heading there, ain't you?"

"That's right," Beta replied. "We're hoping to get there before this evening."

"You look real weird for a gal from the Suburbs, honey," Wilma, the hippopotamus, remarked. "The gals there dressed real dull. I mean, *real* dull! But you gotta come from somewhere, ain't you!"

The limousine was now accelerating smoothly into the rush of motorway traffic. Lorries rumbled by, and we were overtaken by fast cars driven by sales representatives in shirt sleeves with their jackets hung ostentatiously from a coat-hanger by the rear passenger door. Beta and I were squeezed next to each other against the rhinoceros and opposite the others. Our companions truly dwarfed us.

"My friends are from Phaedra. They're on holiday here," Hubert explained. "They're all great enthusiasts for the works of the Great Poet."

"Well, not just him, Hubert hon!" the hippopotamus elaborated. "We're real enthusiastic about all the history and tradition in this land of yours. There ain't none of that in Phaedra. Very nearly doodly squat. We ain't been around for as long as you guys. You got everything here. I've gotten real impressed by it. How can there be so much history in one country? That's what I'd like to know!"

"Not everything's so goddamn fine here, though!" the rhinoceros interjected. "I ain't seen so many peasants and proles in my entire life! Ain't you guys got any civic pride? Your City's a goddamn cess pit in some places. Every few metres you stumble over a beggar or tramp. There ain't nothing like that back home."

"Your country doesn't have the social problems we have here," Hubert remarked. "You're all much better off."

"You're goddamn right!" agreed White. "Wayne's right, too. You should clear

those bums right off the street, so's decent people ain't pestered. And what a shambles your General Election was. I ain't ever seen such an amateurish affair. Those riots and demonstrations! That ain't democracy. That ain't what I'd call democracy anyhow. We had a real bad time in all that hoohah."

"Yeah, honey," agreed Wilma. "There was this pack of dogs campaigning for your Red Party..."

"I thought they were Black..." White interjected.

"Well, whatever! Goddamn bunch of extremists. Real nasty they were. This goddamn aggressive collie looked like it'd really go for me, didn't it? There ain't nothing civilized in them people. Not in any one of them. There ain't no extremists in Phaedra. There ain't no place for them. And that's 'cause we got a real democracy. A democracy based on a bedrock constitution of justice and fairness for all."

"I really can't agree with you, Wilma," remarked Hubert diplomatically. "We have a true democracy here. Our problems are not with the electoral system alone. It's because central government is so undecided it has lost control, and everything is governed locally. That's why the Coition government dissolved itself in favour of whichever party gained the most votes in the General Election..."

"And what do you get!" snorted the rhinoceros. "The goddamn Reds! You've gotten yourselves a Commie government now, ain't you! It'd be better for you guys if your Blue Party took over. Even them Blacks would be a better bunch."

"You've gotten the worst you could get!" agreed White. "I liked the bunch that run your Suburbs. There mayn't be no life there at all, but at least things run well. That's what you guys need. A good sensible practical government. Not a bunch of Commies. You guys are gonna be digging for salt in gulags before you know it. It's

gonna be one perpetual revolution after another as the different Commie factions fight each other. It ain't gonna be no goddamn picnic. You'd never get Commies in power in Phaedra. We got it better sussed. The longer I've been here the more I'm glad we live in Phaedra however much history and tradition you guys got."

"Your constitution is quite different," Hubert argued. "In this country, institutions and practices have evolved over time. There's never been a master plan. It's just changed gradually from a feudal to a modern society. Phaedra's never been anything but modern. Your constitution was consciously and meticulously planned. It has so many checks and balances it could never fall into the chaos that's happened here."

"You're goddamn right!" agreed the rhinoceros. "There ain't **no** chance of that. Our constitution is Phaedra's pride and joy. Like a pair of scales, it is. Balancing all the possible extremes and gravitating towards the centre. We got two political parties, not like your six or twenty or whatever it is. Two parties is all you need. After all, you don't want more than one lot in power at any one time. And the way our constitution is set up, one lot can't expect to be in power for very long before the other guys come in. And when the Fat party hold the presidency, you can be goddamn sure the Thins have got the Senate or Congress. There ain't no way that one lot can have it all their way."

"They do say," argued Hubert, "that there really isn't much difference between your two main parties. That they hold pretty much the same opinions and the real difference is which businesses pay money into which party funds. In fact, people from one party cross over to the other bewilderingly often."

The rhinoceros snorted, while White smiled superciliously. "There ain't no

goddamn truth in that, Hubert, old chap. There ain't no truth at all. We been Thins all our lives. We wouldn't dream of giving the other guys any support at all..."

"Though we did support President Elvis in the last Presidential election, didn't we, honey?" objected Wilma.

"That's different. Elvis is a Thin at heart, even though he did stand as a Fat. No, Hubert. We welcome disillusioned Fats into our fold with open arms. The more the better. And we ain't gonna close our door for nobody. If any of those Fat guys see the light, then that's okay by me. And just as there are Fats who go one way, there's the odd renegade Thin who goes the other. I was real disgusted when Senator John-boy defected to the Fats. And mid-office too. We ain't had no chance to elect him out, when we'd just gotten him elected. That was real goddamn sneaky!"

"What are the differences between the two political parties?" wondered Beta.

"All the difference in the goddamn world..." snorted Wayne.

"...Except when there's bipartisan support." elaborated White. "But there's a heck of a lot of policy differences. The Fats put taxes up and increase government spending, while the Thins cut taxes and reduce government spending, except on defence which the Fats increase and the Thins cut, and adjust revenue collection accordingly..."

"...So it all amounts to much the same thing," said Wilma. "Which demonstrates how well our system of checks and balances works. That's why the symbol of Phaedra is a pair of scales held by the Hound of Liberty. As long as everything is balanced and nothing extreme get the upper hand, then you've got stability, progress and prosperity."

"It could be said," Hubert continued to argue, "that it's because of your

prosperity that you have such a stable and balanced system of government.”

“Yeah, sure!” Wayne agreed. “But it takes a good strong system of government to keep that prosperity. Okay, in Phaedra we got more of everything than you got in your country. We got more oil, uranium, steel, silicon, chemicals and all than you got, and we got the businesses that make up for anything we’re short in operating in other countries. There’s a heck of a lot of Phaedran businesses trading in the financial sector of the City, for instance. And when I look at the guys here who can’t get nothing for thousands of guineas in the City, but are as rich as heck in the Country, and all your beggars... Well, there ain’t no comparison. You need a strong currency like the Phaedran riyal, not a mickey mouse currency like you got.”

The car abruptly slowed, and the hippopotamus and Hubert very nearly fell on top of us, which would have been severely injurious. Wilma and Wayne must have each weighed at least a ton. The rhinoceros peered out of the window: we were no longer on a wide motorway, but on a single hedge-lined carriageway.

“And that’s another thing. The difference between your Country and your City. We ain’t gone hardly a hundred kilometres and it’s like you’ve gone back a century in time. This ain’t no way to run a modern road system. I reckon it ain’t gonna be many more kilometres till this road’s just a goddamn dirt track.”

“The Country can’t afford the expense of motorway construction,” Hubert explained.

“There’s always some goddamn reason or other, ain’t there!” snorted Wayne. “It’s gonna be a real crawl from now on, ain’t it!”

Indeed, he was right as the car stopped periodically at traffic lights, railway crossings, and at one point to allow by a herd of ground sloths and water buffalo being

guided across the road by border collies. However, Beta and Hubert looked more relaxed than they had in the frantic activity of the City. Beta took my hand in hers, and pointed out to me such things as windmills and farm cottages.

The conversation paused for several leagues, picking up speed between towns and villages, and then slowing down as we passed through them. Occasionally, we passed sign posts pointing behind us towards the City, and, less frequently, ones indicating the Suburbs. At long last I was returning home.

In one town, the limousine stopped for rather longer than normal. We peered through the windscreen at the shops and houses of a fairly ordinary looking town, flags flying from windows and very ordinary people wandering by.

“What the goddamn heck’s happening!” White exclaimed. “Why’ve we stopped?” He leaned over to the chauffeur. “What’s the goddamn delay?”

The alsatian apologetically turned his head round. “I don’t know, sir. There appears to be some sort of demonstration or march ahead. All the traffic’s stopped. There are plenty of police!”

A long stationery queue of traffic stretched ahead of us and a police officer, a tall mastiff in a peaked helmet, walked towards our car and bent over to talk to the chauffeur who wound down his window.

“There’s trouble ahead, I’m afraid, sir. We’re advising everyone to turn round and leave the town. We’d be much obliged if you did so too.”

“What goddamn trouble is that?” demanded the rhinoceros.

“We’re not absolutely certain, sir. Some trouble makers we think. Hooligans. Shops are being broken into and smashed up. Innocent people are being beaten up. We don’t wish to alarm you, though, sir. We have it all in hand.”

He then righted himself and continued walking along the line of traffic behind us. Several cars had already turned around a full semi-circle and were driving back past us.

“I just can’t believe your goddamn country!” cursed White. “There ain’t nothing but chaos and anarchy.” He leaned over to the chauffeur. “Well, what are you waiting for, man? Ain’t you gonna be turning round too?”

“I fully intend to, sir,” the alsatian replied. “But this car is very long and I need a very wide turning circle. I shall manoeuvre just as soon as it’s physically possible.”

“Pah!” snorted Wayne. “In Phaedra, cars like this ain’t considered long at all. You just ain’t got the road space in your country for decent sized cars at all. Most of your cars are less than four metres long. That ain’t nothing!”

The hippopotamus looked alarmed. “I don’t like what I can see up ahead. Do you see that smoke? And those youths. They don’t look too friendly!”

“Youths?” wondered Wayne. “What youths? Oh my god! There’s hundreds of them! They must be the hooligans that cop was telling us about.”

The street ahead of us was swollen with a massed and very ragged band of young people who were marching in our direction. They were throwing stones and garbage at shop windows. The Police officers confronting them were hopelessly outnumbered and ill-prepared. Several banners were raised in the air illustrated by President Chairman Rupert’s face and sporting words like **TRUTH** and **JUSTICE**.

“It’s the Illicit Party again!” exclaimed Beta. “Wherever we go they cause trouble and smash things up!”

“What’s that?” demanded Wilma. “Who are these louts?”

“They’re from the Illicit Party. We saw them marching and causing riots in the

City. We didn't think they'd do the same here, so many miles away. They started a fight in a night club we were in. And one in the theatre district as well!"

"Oh yeah! The theatre district!" remarked White. "We heard there was trouble there. It was a goddamn shame. We'd bought these tickets to see a musical in Lambdeth Square or Unity Avenue or someplace. It was gonna be a setting of the Great Poet's poems on metaphysical longing and the justice of God, with people dressed up as poodles and roaches. We were really looking forward to it we were..."

"There's some mighty fine songs in that musical." Wilma interjected. "We got the CD in the old country. **A Rose Would Be Finer Far** it was called. Real catchy tunes. I'd been humming them for weeks. I was thinking it'd really perk me up!"

"Yeah, real good night out it was gonna be. We'd been looking forward to seeing it for ages, and Hubert was gonna be there as well. But it was cancelled, and so too was very nearly every goddamn show in town. The whole area was ringed off with plastic tape, and there were goddamn police everywhere. There'd been an explosion or something, as well as some kind of riot. You guys really ought to do something about this Illicit Party. In Phaedra, they'd not even be allowed to put candidates forward in an election. Goddamn thugs!"

"They're getting closer!" shrieked Wilma. "Those police ain't gonna stop them, are they! Hey, driver, ain't you able to move yet?"

The chauffeur turned his head round, looking quite alarmed himself. "Just a moment, madam. I'm just waiting for the car ahead of me to move."

"That ain't good enough!" Wayne ordered. "We don't care whether you scratch the paintwork. You turn this goddamn car round now! Those goddamn maniacs look like they're gonna do a heck of a sight more damage than you're likely to

do.”

“Yes sir. I will,” assented the chauffeur, obediently starting manoeuvres which almost immediately caused obstructions to everyone else. In the process, the car soon obstructed both carriage ways, had risen onto two sets of pavements and very nearly crashed into a lamp-post. It then stopped very awkwardly in the middle of the road, unable to turn further because of the positioning of other vehicles both ahead of us and behind. On one side was the road leading out of the town and on the other was the sound of violent commotion, the sight of angry protesters and a row of police edging steadily back towards us, increasingly overwhelmed by the demonstration.

An empty beer can collided on the car’s bonnet and clattered down onto the pavement. The cars who had also turned round were hooting at us to move out of the way so that they could also follow police advice and exit. As we sat there, helpless in the traffic, the police officers turned tail and fled in our direction. One, a dalmation, had lost his helmet and had blood running down his muzzle onto the deep blue of his uniform. The hoot and cacophony became ever louder.

The chauffeur reversed further, crunching the rear head lights against a door to a house and very nearly pushing it in. Then with an agonising turn of the steering wheel, the car span round, a headlamp shattering into the base of a lamp post, before breaking free and pulling off. As it did so, police officers scrambled over the cars ahead of us while aggressive youths leapt over the same cars after them, terrorising the passengers. The town receded behind us while the cars we had been obstructing became wholly overwhelmed by rioters. A plume of smoke rose from behind them.

When the town was completely out of sight, the chauffeur drove down a road which within only a few miles lost its metalled base and crumbled into rough cobbles.

Despite the limousine's excellent suspension, we were thrown roughly from one side to another. We were quite definitely in the Country.

"Hey, driver!" commanded Wayne. "You stop this goddamn car now. We ain't gonna take no more of this. We've gotten battered about enough. We don't want the car to be totally bust."

"But this is the only other way to get where we want, sir."

"We don't goddamn care!" chimed in White. "We'll go somewhere else. Anywhere. There are plenty other historic sites in this goddamn country."

"But what about your guest, Hubert, sir? He specifically desired to visit the historic tomb stones of Philately."

Hubert leaned forward to the driver. "I can walk there, driver. Please do what my friends say and stop the car."

The car abruptly drew to a halt at the entrance to a field, and we all disembarked, including the driver, Wilma, White and Wayne. The driver examined the damage caused to the car, while Hubert and his Phaedran friends chatted with us by a hedge delimiting a field of mastodon grazing on tall luxuriant grass. There was quite extensive damage to the car's headlamps, a nasty dent on the bumper and dents on the roof which must have resulted from the projectiles that had cluttered onto the car as it drew off.

"Well, Hubert," said White apologetically. "It's a goddamn shame we gotta drop you and your friends out here in the Country, but there ain't nothing we can do about it!"

"Any more kilometres of this goddamn dirt track, and I'm gonna be black and blue for the rest of my goddamn days, Hubert honey!" exclaimed Wilma. "I ain't never

seen nothing in my life like those hooligans. What do they think they're gonna goddamn achieve? Nothing like that could ever happen in Phaedra. We got asylums for guys like them!"

Hubert sighed. "I am indeed very sorry that your visit has been so badly marred. I have never before seen such violence and insurrection. I can but hope that your visit from hereon is not going to be further troubled."

"Illicit Party, ain't they?" mused Wayne. "I ain't heard of them before, and I sure hope I ain't gonna hear about them again. We're gonna head back to the firm where we hired the automobile and just hope our insurance covers disasters like this. Look at the goddamn state of it! I'm sure that driver could have done a better job in getting us out."

"He was only doing the best he could," Hubert said in his defence.

"Sometimes the best ain't good enough!" sniffed White. "Well it's been mighty swell seeing you again, Hubert. I just hope you get to see this grave or whatever you're looking for. Me? I think I might be quite glad to get out of your goddamn country alive."

White and his pachyderm friends squeezed back into the limousine when the chauffeur had finally reversed it, and they trundled off over the cobbled road, leaving Hubert with Beta and me. Hubert waved farewell, using a lace handkerchief he'd somehow retrieved from his pocket, holding his tri-cornered hat to his chest. When the car had turned the corner beyond a hedge and out of sight, he replaced his hat firmly on his head and sighed.

"Your journey and mine coincide for several leagues more. You will do me an honour should you accompany me."

“The honour is surely ours,” Beta replied, graciously. “You’ve been more than generous to us. And anyway we don’t even know the way to the Suburbs from here.”

“In that I can be of assistance. My quest for relics of the Great Poet has provided me with a nearly unsurpassed acquaintance with all corners of the Country. There are few who know its contours and permutations better than I.”

22

“Characteristically fresh and invigorating!” exclaimed Hubert drawing in a deep breath of Country air, as we stood on a hill overlooking fields and moorland. “It’s only when I am in the Country I feel truly myself. I am sure that it was in contemplation of wide open countryside as this, with nothing but an expanse of blue sky above him, that the Great Poet drew his greatest inspiration.”

Beta nodded in agreement. “It’s so beautiful here. Away from the City, its crowds and its pollution. Look at those daffodils over there. Simply hundreds of them! And those puppies playing around in them. Such innocence. Such joy. Don’t you think it’s wonderful?”

She squeezed my hand, and I could only agree that the fields and meadows stretching out ahead of us presented a truly inspirational view. I breathed deep, taking in the scent of pollen blown from the wild grass, and carried in vaporous clouds over the larger tussocks, past a grazing antelope and onwards over the rolling hillocks as far as we could see.

“The Great Poet wrote a great deal about the Country,” Hubert mused. “Again and again he returned to it, especially in his romantic period. For him the Country was always a thing of beauty, to be admired like a painting. He believed that art should aspire to capture that great beauty: something he tried and succeeded, in his odes, sonnets and vignettes. **Ode To A Caterpillar. Reflections on the First Frog Spawn of Spring. The Scorpion on the Rose Petal. Fertility Carried in the Air. The Shepherd and his Sheep Dog.** Works of Art which will be remembered long after the

last turf of soil is embalmed in concrete and the last green field becomes a supermarket car park. But for now, let us just enjoy the beauty that is left. And curse the onward march of progress which threatens to eliminate such innocent beauty and to turn the air into an ozone-free, carbon dioxide rich and sulphurous poison.”

The giant teddy bear bound surprisingly swiftly down the hillside, with Beta and me chasing after him, our hands clasped together. When we caught up with him, under the shade of an enormous tree, clasping his tri-cornered hat in one paw while patting his forehead with a silk handkerchief, I confessed that I had no great appreciation for the Great Poet while I was at school.

“In fact, I’m afraid it all seemed rather irrelevant and somewhat boring.”

“That is the great tragedy of our time,” mused Hubert reflectively. “There is no longer the inclination to reflect on the great insights of poetry. There are too many distractions from day-to-day things which appear more pressing and relevant, although there can be nothing in the world more deserving of our attention than a well-crafted phrase or a skilfully expressed trope.”

“I really enjoyed poetry at school,” countered Beta, “and although the Great Poet wasn’t really my favourite, I could see that his poems were really very good.”

“It’s the fault of state education!” grunted Hubert. “What else could it be? After so many years, the Great Poet’s oeuvre has lost its freshness for the children of the Suburbs, tempted away by motor cars, videos and fast food take-aways from the most profound insights ever yet attained by any one person. Perhaps, too, a familiarity of landscapes as beautiful as this engenders the reflection and contemplation required to enjoy the delicate and exquisite flower of great poetry.”

“I’m sure that is so,” affirmed Beta. “I am much more inspired by poetry here

in all this fresh air than I could ever be in the City.”

We strolled through green open fields, past herds of deer and sheep to a long level hedge separating us from fields in which mammoths and glyptodonts were grazing. The hedge led to a wooden gate and stile, on which sat a collie chatting to a scorpion. They paused when they saw us, and greeted us politely.

“Good morrow, my friends,” greeted Hubert amiably. “It’s a fine day, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is, sire,” agreed the collie unenthusiastically. “It is a day which best pleases my herd. The wind is light and the sun shines. No rain to chill their bones. But too much of this weather and my crops will surely suffer, and then I shall be cursing such days as this.”

“Surely, it is best to simply enjoy good weather when one can,” Hubert remarked.

“Aye, such advice is fine when weather is well tempered. My stock enjoys it and my vineyards too, even if my potatoes would like more rain. But such is my living, sire. The weather can never be wholly perfect.”

“And now you are no doubt ruminating on the results of the General Election. How does the victory of the Red Party bode for you? Ill, I suspect, for a taxpayer such as you who has all the responsibility of man management.”

The collie barked slightly. “On the contrary, sire. The Red Party victory was much welcomed by farmers throughout the Country. They had my vote and that of all my neighbours. It is only the very wealthiest farmers who had much to benefit from the Blue Party gaining power. For far too long the Country has been neglected, and only the Red Party, and perhaps the Green Party, has ever explicitly endorsed a policy to redress the balance between the City and the Country. The Blue Party talk about

encouraging wealth creation, but it is for the benefit of yon City folk, not for them as have to till the land and furrow the soil. The Red Party has promised to direct government subsidies to farmers and manipulate the markets in the Country's favour."

"I thought the Red Party represented the interests of only the poor and down-trodden," Hubert argued. "How can that be true of you Country people, living here in the midst of such plenty, generated from the wealth of the soil?"

"Beauty is all very well, sire. You gentlemen have such fanciful ideas of how good life is for us in the Country. And your fancies have brought us folk few favours, if you don't mind me saying so. We might enjoy living in the Country, and this is where we have chosen to live, but we want practical help. Our produce is made and sold at Country prices, not City prices. Not the prices you City folk are used to. Us folk, we talk in farthings, pennies and shillings. City folk talk in hundreds and thousands of guineas, but pay us for our produce only as little as they can. The Red Party promise to reward us better for our labours and to even the score more in Country folk's favour."

"What the Red Party promises and what the Red Government delivers are two different things. Surely, you will be just as neglected by the Red Government as you have been by the Coition Government before it."

"That I can't say, sire. The Red Party has been in power not yet two days. But already they have sent representatives to our homes to explain how the new system of government subsidies and investment will work, and how it will be paid for by the higher prices charged for our labours. I fancy, sire, the Blue Party or the White Party would not be so forthcoming on our behalf. The Country has been exploited for many years by the City, the Suburbs and the financial institutions: taking from us, loading us

with debts we can never repay, offering us advice which ruin our crops and squander our resources for short-term gain, and telling us that we should learn from them and disregard hundreds of years of practical experience. The Red Party, however, have sensible and practical ideas which they seem committed to put into practise.”

“I must say,” Hubert remarked, apparently dumbfounded, “I had never thought to see the day when the anarchists, communists and socialists would rule the Country with the apparent consent of the farmers.”

“Anarchists? Communists? I don’t hold to them at all, sire. But that isn’t what us Country folk find attractive about the Red Party. It really matters not what turn of cloth these Red Party folk affect to wear. What matters is that they provide us with stable markets for our produce, an incentive to farm and sell, and don’t treat us like Country bumpkins with no nonce nor sensitivity. Political ideology is not what concerns us Country folk. Ultimately what we want is results, and if the Red Government provide these, then we shall be satisfied.”

As we resumed our way across the fields, Hubert mused on the collie’s remarks. “Such lamentable disregard for ideology and policy! Do these Country people not see that the interests of the traditional proletariat constituency of the Red Party and those of the peasant will inevitably clash?”

“But aren’t the people who work in the Country much the same as those in the City,” argued Beta. “They all want a good living for the work they do. Aren’t you just confusing workers with the work they do?”

“One is defined by one’s employ,” remarked Hubert. “But here we are in the midst of beauty. Look at all these green fields. That one being ploughed by that robotic tractor over there, for instance. And, goodness me, what does that large Formica sign

say?”

He pointed over a meadow where deer were frolicking with rabbits and skunks to an imposing sign reading: Sold To The **Lambdeth & Houndswich Mutual Assurance Society**. Behind it was a field that had been left to neglect: wild grasses and thistles crowded inside, more than waist high and blowing about in the faint breeze. A rusting hulk of a tractor and savage guard dogs were surrounded by many acres jealously guarded by barbed wire and thorn bushes.

Hubert waved his massive arm. “That collie was wrong to say that the City and its financial institutions take no interest in the Country. Here, if proof were needed, is evidence of the investment and resources ploughed back into the Country. It is not all one-way traffic.”

The meadow extended until it reached a line of deciduous trees, weeping willows and bull-rushes on the banks of a gently running river where water rats, otters and frogs played in the water and a family of swans glid by in stately procession. The bank was too steep for us to approach the water closely, although Beta wanted to wash the mud off her feet. A sign warned us that fishing was strictly prohibited, but this didn’t trouble some beavers sitting on the bank who were dangling their fishing rods in the flowing current.

“Ah, we’re approaching the lake where my journey ends,” Hubert remarked. “The latter years of the Great Poet’s life were spent there in a very pleasant cottage, now a museum managed by the Great Poet Trust of which I am proud to claim membership. He spent many pleasant hours by the shores of the lake, and of this river too, I am sure, inspired by the patience and skill of the kingfisher, the elegance of the striding heron and the occasional sight of the plesiosaur that lives there. It was there he

consolidated his numerological theories of nature, humour and history. A theory famously illustrated in his series of Lake Sonnets, twenty-two in all, which encapsulate the delicate balance of nature, art and culture. I'm not so sure he would be so enthusiastic about many of the wares now sold in his last refuge which purport to his legacy."

"What are they?" I wondered.

"Pottery mugs embellished with his face. Tee-shirts enriched by his poetry. Fluffy toys. Rich chocolates. Soft drinks. Sticks of rock. There is no limit to the merchandise sold supposedly celebrating his poetic greatness. There are even plans afoot to construct a Great Poet theme park, and I have read bowdlerised 'popular' editions of his more accessible works. There may even be a television cartoon series based on his epic poem **Spectacles Lost**. There can be no limit as to how his legacy can be debased in the pursuit of an ill-gained farthing."

The river meandered about, occasionally bowing around and almost cutting itself off, and gradually getting wider. And then, around one of its many bends, the river rapidly emptied into a lake many leagues across and ringed by small hills. There was a village at one end of the lake, by which bobbed several small boats. The buildings were all very modest, bar a large white hotel decorated by prominent letters raised above its roof which even from this distance quite distinctly read **The Great Poet Hotel**. A boat sailed across the still waters embellished by the words: **The Great Poet Tours Ltd**. The sun's reflection shimmered in the middle of the lake occasionally shattered by the leaping of trout and the splash of low gliding pterosaurs. A well-worn path led towards the small town prominently signposted **The Great Poet's Cottage**, while another path in the other direction led to **The Suburbs**,

amongst other places.

“So, this is where we part,” commented Hubert. “I wish you well on your quest, but I hope that this Rupert does not mislead you when he says that the Suburbs is where you will find the Truth. I really do not trust this Rupert or any of his followers. They do not seem a gentlemanly breed to me. But here at least there is little evidence of his unmannerly supporters.”

The giant teddy bear lumbered off towards the small town, while Beta and I followed the lake in the other direction. It was a warm afternoon, the air brushed pleasantly against our faces and water lapped lazily against the shore just by the path. Dragon-flies buzzed about in the rushes. Trout and pike swam lissomely by, close to the surface and unworried by the swooping pterosaurs. Deer, dogs, badgers and even a diplodocus stood on the shore and sipped the cool clean water. The path was dusty and dry, and we were wary of treading on the scorpions and thistles that flourished in the aridity.

“It’s *so* hot!” exclaimed Beta, and then without pausing, as she had no clothes to remove, she strode into the lake until it was up to her waist and propelled herself into the water with some forceful breast-strokes. She swam nearly a furlong out, turned round and shouted. “Come on in! It’s lovely in here. It’s really not that cold.”

I nodded, and shyly shed my clothes, after confirming that I was being watched by no one, of any species, cautiously laid them where I could see them from a distance and walked out slowly into the water. It seemed very cold to me, but when the water was deep enough I ignored my shivers, crouched down and swam out to catch up with Beta. We hovered around each other looking at the hills and the Great Poet Hotel.

“It’s lovely here, isn’t it?” Beta exclaimed. “This is where I want to live. In the

Country. Surrounded by beauty and fresh air. As far as possible from the traffic, the noise and the chaos of the City. What could possibly be better?"

Without waiting for my response, she kissed me on the lips, chuckled and dived into the water, her long wet hair trailing behind as she slid in, and splaying over her shoulders when she surfaced a yard or so ahead.

"They say the Country is poor. But they must be wrong. However many trillions of guineas people may have in the City, it is they who are poor to be deprived of all this beauty, and we in the Country who are truly rich. What price can be attached to nature at its very best?"

Not far from where we were swimming was a picturesque open-air café on the water's edge served by a gruff looking bear, offering a limited but appetising selection of hot food at prices we had no difficulty in affording. For only a few groat we had a meal of ploughman's lunch and pastie, seated on an unsteady wooden chair in the café garden in front of an enormous bench, with the accompaniment of warm beer, gnats, dragon flies and the occasional bee. We faced towards the lake, the sun high above the water, as ducks flew overhead and a rowing boat struggled by.

Beta leaned over to kiss me. "Oh! It's so beautiful! Surely the Truth is here rather than in the Suburbs. Why don't we simply abandon our search and settle here?"

Beta was persuasive, but I was disinclined to abandon my quest after having come so far and now being so near where our goal promised to be. I was about to reply when the atmosphere, previously so peaceful and becalmed, was disturbed by four young people in the utilitarian outfits that Una had called Rupert suits. Two were Jack Russell Terriers with green berets sporting a badge depicting Rupert's face, one was an enormous scorpion with a sleeve for each of his four arms, and a trouser leg for

each of his remaining four limbs, and a young female spaniel who had decorated her beret with a long pheasant's feather. They sat around a bench nearby, and shouted their orders to the bear.

The spaniel noticed us watching them with trepidation, our food eaten and our beers half-finished. She greeted us amiably: "Are you also off to seek the Truth, comrades?" Beta nodded silently. The spaniel's three companions ignored her as she ambled towards us on her hind legs, more intent on their own involved and raucous conversation. "We're going to the Suburbs, too. It seems everyone is. And not just Illiberal Socialists! People from all over are congregating there. Thousands of people are going there. By foot, car, train or aeroplane. It's so exciting!"

"It's odd that so many people are going to the Suburbs," I remarked. "It's not usually a place where people want to go."

"It takes the great wisdom and insight of the President Chairman to recognise that it is exactly where to find the Truth. Only he could have identified its true location. And only he could have inspired so many to trek there, so soon after the excitement of the General Election. The Red Government are broadcasting propaganda telling people not to follow this great quest. They say that there are already too many people converging on the Suburbs, and that it is ill-equipped to cope with it. This proves the malevolence and incorrectness of Red Party ideology. They wish to deny everyone the opportunity of collaborating in the quest for the Truth: the one most ardently and assiduously pursued in all history. Are you members of the Illicit Party?"

Beta shook her head. "It's not very popular where I come from."

"That's a great shame. The Illicit cause has many barriers and obstacles to overcome in its relentless march to power. The vile and false propaganda of our

enemies in the Red, Blue, White, Black and Green Parties has misled many who would surely all follow the cause if they were better informed, as are those of us in our woodland borough of Rupert. My sincere hope is that the pursuit of the Truth will converts many more to Illiberal Socialism. So many have followed the great marsupial and seek the Truth in his wake.”

She glanced back at her companions who were staring at her and us silently with what might be either friendly curiosity or hushed enmity. Beta looked rather nervous as she hastily drank her beer and stood up. “Well, it’s been nice talking to you, but we must be on our way!”

“Yes. Refreshment first. And then on with the struggle!” the spaniel said approvingly.

She scampered back to her friends whose questioning of her didn’t appear at all amiable, as we strode briskly out through the café gate and back onto the track. A crossroads pointed the way to innumerable destinations: Honeysuckle Wood, Cowslip Meadow, Dandelion Green, and, less rustically the Suburbs. This route led away from the lake through bracken and heather, over a ridge between two hills. We looked behind at the café where many others wearing Rupert suits were arriving and transforming the peaceful ambience of the lake with their greetings and shouts. As we climbed, we could hear them singing to the accompaniment of marshal music blasting forth from portable sound systems.

“I thought we’d have got away from the Illicit Party in the Country!” Beta exclaimed. “But here they are! Surely they’re not *all* going to the Suburbs.”

It seemed that they were, because when we ascended the brow of the ridge and looked over we were astonished to see a caravanserai of banners and flags being borne

by countless people in Rupert suits marching along the meadow grass and bracken. They formed a long procession straggling on endlessly through the valley towards the distant roofs and church steeples of the Suburbs ahead. Even from this distance, we could hear the odd snatches of political chants and singing. All species were represented: sheep, dogs, ostriches, titanotheres, gremlins and hippopotami. We stood on the ridge, uncertain whether to continue or turn back.

“I don’t want to meet up with all those people!” Beta exclaimed. “What happens if they get violent like they did in the City yesterday and in that town this morning? I wouldn’t like to get mixed up in that!”

“What shall we do? We can’t go back because there are more of them in the café, and they’ll soon be coming out and heading in this direction. And if we go forward we can’t avoid the procession.”

“We’ll go through the woods over there,” Beta decided, pointing at the woodland that ran along one side of the valley. “It’s a diversion, but at least it’s in the right direction.”

We skirted up the valley side towards a stile that entered into the wood, marked by a painted yellow arrow for the benefit of country ramblers. The heather and gorse gave way to long grass which brushed against our knees. Meadow flowers, like cow parsley and nettles, were being grazed by the occasional elk or aurochs. We clambered over the stile and onto a well-worn path fringed by dry rotting undergrowth. It was much cooler in the woods as the sunlight allowed through the gaps in the foliage amassed in only small patches on the forest floor. Bluebells and daffodils gathered in huge bunches where there was enough sun for them to flourish. A couple of dogs wearing berets had forgotten their ideological pursuits and indulged together

in more carnal ones in a small clearing, their Rupert suits discarded haphazardly about them. Beta averted her eyes and nervously grasped my hand.

“I hope we won’t come across too many more Illicitists,” she remarked.

Fortunately, we did not. The woodland life was unconcerned with any quest. Deer huddled in the darkest shadows of the wood, staring at us guardedly and nervously. Squirrels, both red and grey, were running up and down the tall tree trunks. A pine marten rested high above our heads while a gaggle of monkeys swung through the very highest branches where the occasional owl perched imperiously on guard.

We soon forgot the threat of the Illicit Party and chatted idly about the things we had seen together and our expectations of the Suburbs. Beta had a remarkable sixth sense which enabled her to tread surely along the uneven path, never scratching her feet on the dry branches and twigs scattered on the path, avoiding the small mounds of faeces and the patches of nettles that had encroached onto the path. She sometimes wandered off into the wood to bury her nose in bluebells. As we walked, the trees changed in character as did the soil in which they grew. Their roots sometimes spread out over the path and gained anchorage on the most precipitous slopes.

We became aware of squawking and cawing from behind. I turned my head to see a flock of crows and rooks burst out from the highest trees and fly overhead. A stag and several hinds thundered by, followed by fauns, rabbits and skunks. An owl flew very close above our heads, the stroke of its wings brushing us with a breeze unusual in the stillness of the forest air. I glanced at Beta for an explanation for this sudden rush of activity, but her eyes were closed, her head raised and her nostrils sniffing the air. I sniffed too but could smell nothing more than the usual rich mixture of arboreal odours.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. It’s not normal, whatever it is! You don’t suppose it’s something to do with the Illicit Party do you?”

I shook my head. “I can’t say. But why were you sniffing like that? Could you smell something?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Beta frowning. “Something like burning. You know, that smell you get on a log fire before it properly catches.” She sniffed again. “Yes. There it is again. Stronger now. Can you smell anything?”

“Something. I don’t know whether it’s burning. Is there a fire or something? Perhaps we’re near an encampment. They might be having a barbecue.”

“That’s possible,” agreed Beta, walking on but still quite troubled. Squirrels dashed between our feet, and there was the loud crashing of tapirs running by in the foliage. Beta shouted at one of the tapirs: “What’s going on?”

“Fire!” shouted the tapir, pausing momentarily. “There’s a forest fire!”

He picked up a gallop and disappeared.

Beta looked at me with visible alarm. “We’d better run!”

I agreed, and we raced through the woods, away from our still unseen enemy. It wasn’t to remain invisible for long, as we came to the top of a ridge and could see the tops of trees burning red and yellow less than a mile behind us, crackling and disintegrating in flames which were leaping up from the lower branches. There was a sudden crash as one of the trees fell down in flames setting alight trees further ahead of it. The dry bracken, twigs and leaves must have been helping the fire in its progress. Beta and I hurried on, occasionally turning our heads around, to see whether the fire had caught up with us. Beta leapt over branches and skirted around hummocks with an

agility and skill I didn't possess. I kept slipping over and banging my shins against the forest obstacles.

I had no idea where Beta was leading us, but she seemed to know best which way to take, as she took forks in paths and cut across stretches of woodland which followed the same general orientation of all the other animals. Her sense of direction had not failed her, as we soon approached the glimmerings of light in a patch of wood through which we emerged from the arboreal shadow to the unbroken blue of sky in a meadow along a valley similar to where we'd been earlier. Beta didn't stop running even in the open, and, gasping, I followed her example, leaping over the gorse and heather, until we were more than a furlong from the forest edge. She then abruptly stopped, and, panting and coughing, I was grateful to do the same thing.

We sat on a large granite boulder surrounded by short moorland grass, and looked back at the wood. Forest life was emerging, blinking and coughing and panting in the perceived safety. Deer, wolves, boar, pheasants, all gathering in ragged groups and anxiously staring at the destruction of their homes and fearing for their families. From the forest came the aura of flames, the roar of forestry engulfed in fire and the crackle of burning leaves. A strong carbon smell wafted past us.

Not all observers were distressed. A crowd of individuals in Rupert suits were laughing and joking around a solitary tree. Some were actually throwing stones at animals who were struggling to emerge from the forest, forcing them back inside.

Beta glared at them malevolently. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if they'd started the fire," she remarked.

A family of ground sloths blundered free of the forest, and, ignoring the stones (as well they could), ran towards the Illicit Party supporters who dispersed laughing

and jeering. A bear with severe burns on her fur was carrying a small cub in her paws. She lay it down on the ground, and growled viciously at the inquisitive stares of some roe deer and civets who were gathering around.

“We best continue on our way,” Beta remarked. “There are probably more of those Illicit dogs somewhere. They *really* don’t seem at all nice.”

Still fatigued by my running, but not disputing Beta’s wisdom, I followed her to clamber over the moorland, following a general diaspora of forest animals such as muntjacs, wolves, badgers, rooks and even rhinoceri.

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Psychologically and physically exhausted, we finally came within a furlong of the Suburbs, which stretched ahead of us as we mounted the ridge that hid the Country from the Suburbs and its people. Although Beta was rather less than enthusiastic at leaving behind green fields and forests for the neatly aligned houses on the square grid of Suburban planning, I felt a distinct warming. I was almost home again, at last.

In front of the rows of Suburban streets was the Art Gallery, a building I had never seen before but had often heard about, built at a time when the Suburbs had grandiose pretensions beyond its present status. It towered incongruously high above modest semi-detached roofs, built on a peculiar design that blended elements of many different ages and cultures in a bizarre heterogeneous mix. There were Corinthian pillars, Byzantine domes, Gothic towers, Arabic murals and, in the long approach in front, were statues sprinkled about of its garden lawns. A thoroughly modern Formica display attached to its Norman arch announced unnecessarily **The Art Gallery**.

Beta gripped my hand tightly. "It's enchanting!" She gasped. "We must have a look. We've got the time, and anyway I need the rest. My feet are aching." She lifted up the sole of one, bent back and brushed off small grass leaves that had attached themselves there.

I nodded. "I wouldn't mind the detour myself." So we crossed the field to the road, mounted a stile and walked along the spotless tarmac towards the gateway to the Art Gallery grounds. A pig was sitting in a chair wearing a dark navy blue uniform and a peaked cap. He raised his bowed head slightly as we approached, judged us to be

harmless and dropped his head again. We ambled along the gardens, past antique lamp-posts regularly alternating with waste paper bins, by which were empty benches, each distinguished by a plaque donated by patrons of the Art Gallery. The statues on the lawn were as miscellaneous as the architecture. Some were of great antiquity, portraying nude men possessing incredibly muscular build and remarkably tiny penises, and naked women of graceful curvature and combs in their hair. Some were abstract and suggested forms and shapes, exquisite in themselves but remote from concrete reality. Some were composed of a jumble of materials that might have been found on any rubbish heap, but were put together in a harmony of shape and form.

There were very few people around. Beta remarked on this with a frown. "Surely such a large and splendid Art Gallery this should attract people from all over!"

I smiled. "I don't think very many people from the Suburbs are especially enthralled by Art," I speculated. "If this were the City, I'm sure there'd be very many more visitors." I looked around. "Still, it's not totally deserted, so it can't be closed," I commented indicating two eurypterids eating sandwiches on a bench and a family of pigs playing around a statue of an enormous scorpion whose tail was menacingly poised to strike. "There'll be more people inside, I'm sure."

However, after passing the pig seated by the Art Gallery doors hidden by the shadows of the tall Palladian pillars at the top of a steep rise of steps, there seemed to be a paucity of visitors inside the building's immense interior. Along the balcony ringing the entrance hall, a diprotodon was viewing a set of miniatures and a centaur was stretching his head up to look at a very tall statue of an eminent gentleman in a frock coat at the further end of the hall. The only other people were two very bored women sitting behind the glass of the museum shop amongst a collection of posters,

post cards and fine art books.

The hall was not empty, though. Its impressive space was adorned by statues, paintings and murals from all ages, in all styles and often of quite monstrous dimensions. Huge statues representing famous brontosaurus, scorpions, mastodons and psammids were dotted amongst immense paintings of naked women, wealthy patrons, vases of flowers, triptychs of heaven, hell and purgatory, or Midgard, Asgard and Armageddon. Monstrous chandeliers swung above our heads supported by massively thick chains and the rear view of the outspread wings of an albatross in a dress suit.

Beta gasped. "There's so much here! Have we got time to look at it all?"

"We'll see as much as we can," I remarked, striding past a statue of Heracles cracking open a lion's skull with a rock, and underneath a Pop Art painting of the Mighty Thor to enter the smaller galleries beyond. Beta followed, her eyes darting this way and that, at the tiled murals, the luscious geometric carpets, the erotic statues of couples indulging in bizarre sexual gymnastics, and grandiose canvases marked by single massive brush strokes or an abstract mess of thickly dripping oil paints. The whole building had an aura of reverence and silence highly conducive to Art appreciation, locking out all mundane daily affairs.

We walked through a series of corridors, admiring different species of Art, through a room painted black and containing only a single used and collapsed washing-up bottle, past a pile of loosely arranged bricks guarded by a panoply of security devices, and around a vista of videos featuring different views of the same uninspiring terraced house on different times of the day. Our eyes were dazzled by the sights, but our feet were aching more than before we'd arrived. So much for coming into the Art

Gallery to rest.

We entered a smaller room than most, featuring modernist paintings and sculptures from the surrealist to the abstract expressionist, from op art to found art, from the photographic to the neoraphaelite. In the middle of this room stood a large canvass on an easel, behind was a man in his mid-thirties wearing a black beret, a purple smock, and very baggy black trousers. In one hand he held a long paint brush from which globules of paint were threatening to drop while his arm supported a palette kept in place by a thumb through a hole.

The Artist's long nose peeped out from behind the easel, and he scrutinised us coming in with one eye squeezed close and the other along the length of his arm and measured by his upright paint brush. "Good afternoon and welcome, fellow æsthetes," he greeted us. "You come to admire and appreciate the illustrious panoply of Art the Gallery is proud to display, I deem?"

"It's very impressive," I admitted. "There's so much of it, and so varied."

"Not varied enough, I believe," the Artist mused, lowering his brush. "Many fine and illustrious schools are mysteriously unrepresented. Great hiatuses in the grand diffuse tradition of representational art are hidden from sight. Where, for instance, are the metaconcretists, the neomodernists and the protoromantics? Why such paucity of quasisurrealists, aural art and brochure montagists? It is a disgrace they are not represented here. Schools of art which have emerged over the centuries - such as the Marxist school, the Feline expressionists and the heterodoxians - not displaying their great deserved worth."

"That's a lot of different schools of art!" exclaimed Beta. "Which do you practise?"

“All and every one,” the Artist announced proudly. “I am willing to employ any style appropriate to the effect I visualise and which best encapsulates its ultimate Truth.” He raised his paint brush again and scrutinised Beta. “You are a vision rarely encountered in these environs. A woman so unlike those from the Suburbs who most often venture into these galleries. I presume that the Country is your abode. Your bearing and dress is so typical and so worthy of pulchritudinous immortality. It would be an inestimable privilege and a precious opportunity were you to sit for me. Your composure inspires me. I crave to render you in oil: capture your essence, your inmost coherence and your déshabillé. Grant me my wish, I beg.”

Beta smiled, clearly flattered. “Do you want to paint a portrait of me?”

“Most assuredly so. Future ages and cultures must not be denied your beauty.” He gestured towards a chair on which sat a bowl of chrysanthemums and daffodils. “Pose for me here and now. I feel the imperative to capture your soul on my canvass. Remove the vase and flowers. My still life can be completed another day.”

“I’m not sure we have the time,” Beta remarked uncertainly. She looked at me for guidance, but I nodded. The opportunity to rest my feet seemed desirable in itself. “Well, maybe we can. How long will it take?”

“Not long at all, I assure you,” the Artist said, strolling towards the chair, picking up the vase and setting it carefully on the floor. “Sit here. Relax. You *must* agree. My muse must not be denied!”

Beta lowered herself into the chair, crossed her legs and rested her arms on the chair rests. I sat on the padded seats provided by the Art Gallery. The Artist walked back to his easel, removed the painting he’d been working on and carefully placed it against the wall. It was probably intended to be a portrait of the flowers that had

earlier been on the chair, but except for a splash of yellow that might have represented the daffodils there was little in the viscous broad strokes and amorphous puddles of paint which at all resembled flowers or vases. It seemed nothing more than a random mess of oily paint.

“That’s fine!” the Artist said approvingly, studying Beta with the aid of his paintbrush. “Now put on a more solemn expression. Remove the idle humour of your smile. Suggest more pathos and regret. Uncross and slightly open your legs. Lay one hand on the upper thigh. Place your other hand behind your exceptional bouquet of hair. Slightly tilt the ankle. Raise the wrist ever so slightly.”

Beta obediently followed each of the Artist’s instructions, adopting an increasingly uncomfortable and extremely unnatural pose. She ached with each more elaborate demand. At last, the Artist was satisfied, while Beta was on the verge of toppling off the chair and knocking over the vase.

“Perfect!” he said at last. “Uncompromising. Suggestive of idyllic rural grace. Beautiful. You shan’t regret this.”

He laid his palette on the floor and picked up a large thick pencil which he used to draw on the canvass. From where I sat, it was impossible to see exactly what he was doing, but it appeared fairly random and uncoordinated. The pencil slashed backwards and forwards in large broad gestures, pausing occasionally for particular minutiae that seemed worthy of more attention. On occasion he raised his pencil, with the same gesture as with the paintbrush, to measure Beta’s relative height and sometimes that of objects nowhere near Beta, including the doorway behind him and the neon lights above our heads.

“The paintings and sculptures here are very impressive,” I remarked idly.

“You think so?” The Artist remarked. “True, they apprehend some of the rich tradition of Art but there is such a meagre representation of living Art. Art should be seen as it is, not preserved like fossils and antiques. Art is of the moment: vibrant and urgent. It should evoke the time in which we live in all its plurality, eliciting both poverty and opulence.” He gestured towards a large canvass on the wall which consisted of a collapsed and rather worn bicycle tyre glued on to a mass of paint and random cuttings from women’s magazines. “Like this masterpiece, which flaunts the very essence of our time.”

“It does?” wondered Beta. “It doesn’t look quite as impressive as some of the other paintings. Like that one of the pigs dancing in a field in the main hall.”

“Pigs dancing in a field? Could that be Cannelloni, or is it Bratwurst? Such naïve art of the Vermicelli school is the very antithesis of this Art. Whereas Puddle’s classic mirrors to us the ineluctable chaos and complexity of our age, urging one to reassess ones very *raison d’être* and revealing, satirically and subtly, our relationship with travel and the media, - the two main aspects of our age - both deflated in a swirl and posture of free thinking expression; the other is just an illusory image of a time that never existed and probably never will.”

“But we saw pigs just like that playing around a statue of a scorpion as we came in,” Beta objected, wearily holding herself in position. “I’ve never seen bicycle tyres splattered amongst paint and scraps of paper before.”

“That is because you are a Country girl,” explained the Artist. “In your idyllic romantic world, all is play and nature: so to you it seems unaffected. But to most people, deprived of tactile sensual pleasure, the deflated bicycle tyre is more real and more poignant. Particularly so in those City districts so poor that the motor car rarely

encroaches. The most consequential and potent images of our time are urban and Suburban.” He lowered his pencil and leaned back to admire the lines he had sketched on the canvass. He bent down, picked up his palette and brush, and stood back while contemplating where to place the first brush stroke. “Art is not intended to comfort. It should challenge, discomfort, undermine, re-evaluate and disassemble. Art should be a kick in the face, a punch in the groin, or a garrotting in the dungeon. It must hurt, disillusion, deconstruct and destroy. The beholder must reel in shock, cough in rage and splutter in incoherence.”

“That’s not the Art I like most,” Beta argued. “I prefer Art to be beautiful, illuminating and enhancing.”

“And what is more beautiful than that?” insisted the Artist, diagonally tracing a broad stroke of red paint across the canvass. “What enhances more than that which confronts rather than comforts? What is more beautiful than chaos, disorder and anarchy? No doubt you still subscribe to passé notions of beauty, expressed by elegance of shape and form, harmonised by balance between foreground and background, evoking geometric structures of simplicity and symmetry. Surely it is better to subvert such idealistic romantic notions, and capture the nonlinear, nonharmonious whole of our world.”

“Shouldn’t Art achieve more than that?” Beta objected. “Isn’t it Science that should explore such things?”

“*Au contraire*,” the Artist reacted. “The Scientist’s rôle, and that of the Artist, is to see and describe. The two are identical. The difference is in the nature of that observation and description. The Scientist is analytical and rigorous. The Artist is impressionistic, abandoned and sensuous. The Artist and Scientist represent two

aspects of the same Truth. The Scientist reduces the world to axioms, theories, hypotheses and definitions. The Artist exposes its greater, irreducible whole. While the Scientist's tools are those of matriculation and exegesis, those of the Artist's are imagination and technique. The Truth exists in abstract expressionism, cubism and deconstruction. Remove the surface and turbulent disorder reveals its own resplendence and purpose."

"But not all Art is like that," I remarked. "Many of the contemporary pieces here are much more real and representational than you suggest."

"*Quelle dommage!* That is regrettably so. Too many Artists shy away from the deeper and more profound truths. They attempt to capture an unreal perfection of shape, form and purpose which illustrate how little they fathom the higher pursuit of Art. But, *heureusement*, there are sufficient who pursue a greater quest. Not just in the visual Arts displayed here in the rooms and halls of the Art Gallery; but also in the aural, theatrical and olfactory arenas. There are symphonies and concertos that dispense entirely with the need for musical instruments, notation or structure. Novels that have abandoned the imprisonment of language, syntax and punctuation. Plays that are random, uncoordinated and interminable."

"Won't they be rather boring?" Beta wondered, squinting her face in the pain of her posture. "How can a play possibly be worth watching if it has no plot or characters?"

"Isn't life just like that? Is it not just a directionless meandering from birth to death? All the structure that there is in life is that which is imposed on it by timetables, conventions and routine. Traditional theatre betrays its imperative for accurate representation when it suggests more form, structure and purpose than actually

pertains. It becomes nothing more than yet another idealisation of a brutal, unpleasant Truth. Real theatre, like real visual Art, is that which shows the pointlessness, the waste and disorder of life: mundane, disorganised and, yes, boring. But boredom is an inappropriate response. Boredom is a state of mind which refuses to see the power and beauty in the tedious, the monotonous, the unstructured, the interminable and the anticlimactic. Boredom is only one of many possible responses. One can also feel annoyed, irritated, uncomfortable and somnolent. Just as one feels emotions of enlightenment, joy, rapture and purposiveness. When Performance Artists cover themselves in pig swill and excrement; ride around naked on tricycles many times too small for them; wallow in blood from fresh carcasses from the abattoir; lie under a mass of scorpions; or regurgitate nails and used condoms through their nostrils: then they are all capturing the ultimate essence of life, the universe and everything!”

“If such Art has the effect you say why is there not much more of a response to it?” I couldn’t help asking. “Very few people ever seem to be that troubled by it.”

“That is not true,” the Artist assured me. “Although it is often said that indifference is the worst fate that can befall Art: in truth it is oppression and censorship which most bedevil it; even when it also results in some of the most profound *oeuvres*. And I am afraid the forces of intolerance and repression are even now gathering to suppress the finest flourishes of our culture. The religious bigots and fundamentalists damn nonrepresentational and experimental Art as contravening an imperative to celebrate the world. The Coition government often threatened to deprive Art of its lifeblood of funding. And now some of the parties who have set themselves up in opposition to the Red Government attack contemporary Art with a rare ferocity, as if politics were the only province of Artistic enterprise. The Red, White and Green

Parties have always been ambivalent friends of Art. The Blue Party has criticised Art but never threatened to destroy it.

“The Black Party shows no such ambivalence. Their very manifesto is a vicious diatribe of ignorant slander, demonstrating a deep and wilful misunderstanding. If there were a Black, rather than a Red, Government, no Art would be permitted which did not feature heroic figures in classical poses in simplistic tones and colours. Music would become a military march, theatre would become a hackneyed expression of propaganda and the great legacy of the Art of our century would be pulverised into its original components. The Black Party are danger enough, but they have been a force which has commanded little general support beyond their widely scattered racist strongholds. The danger, however, is exacerbated by the Illicit Party, about which I know little but what I do know is that their Chairman Rupert is no friend of Art. What is further alarming is that his excitable followers have displayed their vituperation and violence in a much more active and organised way than the Black Party have ever done. They disrupt exhibitions, firebomb theatres, wantonly destroy monuments and physically attack exponents of contemporary culture.”

“There seem to be rather a lot of Illicit Party supporters heading towards the Suburbs,” Beta remarked. “We saw thousands of them marching through the Country.”

The Artist looked more than a little frightened. “Did you say that there are thousands of these hooligans marching on the Suburbs? Goodness! They could march on the Art Gallery. They could destroy it.”

“Surely, they wouldn’t do anything like that,” I remarked, a little uncertainly. “They’re coming to search for the Truth, not destroy buildings.”

“It wouldn’t be untypical of what we’ve seen of them,” Beta disagreed. “Every time we come across them they pick fights and destroy things. If they could start that fire in the forest, why couldn’t they do the same here?”

“It just doesn’t seem very likely.” I argued. “It doesn’t seem possible that ...”

My sentence was abruptly truncated by a loud crashing noise from elsewhere in the Art Gallery. Beta, the Artist and I hushed to determine what the noise could be. The Artist took up a tense pose, his paintbrush held frozen in mid-air and his face a deathly white. Beta’s pose was actually more relaxed than it had been for more than twenty minutes, but her expression was no less tense than the Artist’s. I tried to imagine what the noise might have been, its echoes still reverberating down the corridors. It sounded too close to be an aeroplane, and the sky was far too clear for it to be thunder.

“I didn’t like the sound of that at all!” Beta remarked.

“What was it?” the Artist asked.

“Perhaps it was ...” I started, but Beta abruptly shushed me, placing a finger over her lips and a cupped hand over her ear to gesture that we listen. I did so, and heard the distant noise of people running about and shouts that sounded inappropriately loud for a place associated with quiet contemplation.

“I think we should get out of here!” Beta remarked.

“I think you’re right!” agreed the Artist cautiously, putting his palette down and placing his paint brush into a glass bowl by the side. “Whatever it was I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out. There’s no ...”

As if echoing the Artist’s fears there was another catastrophic crashing sound, louder than the first, accompanied by the distinct sound of smashing glass. There came

a series of self-congratulatory shouts and yelps.

“Let’s move!” Beta said, running towards me.

The Artist nodded, gazing mournfully at his canvass. Beta and I briefly examined his painting, which really resembled Beta no more than his previous painting resembled flowers. It seemed nothing more than random brush strokes over a series of pencil lines, in which it was just about possible to make out what were either Beta’s eyes or her nipples. The Artist sighed: “It would have been a great work of art. One of my very best. It would have redefined beauty, and captured the very quintessence of rural innocence.”

“It can’t be helped,” Beta said, unimpressed by the Artist’s portrayal of her.

“How do we get out?”

“There’s only one way, and that’s the way you came in,” the Artist answered.

“Well, let’s get going!” I said, grasping Beta’s hand.

We dashed out of the gallery we were in, with the Artist in tow, past canvasses and sculptures, towards the source of the commotion. We soon came across evidence of the cause of the noise. An abstract statue of what may have been a large pig was lying in several broken chunks on the ground, part of it projecting outwards through a smashed skylight. All the paintings in this gallery were slashed by knives, several almost to ribbons, and a pile of tyres which had previously been mounted in the shape of a submarine were scattered widely about.

“The vandals! The vandals!” cried the Artist in genuine distress. “What have they done to Paella’s classic sculpture? And they haven’t spared even the finest Plunkett. And that torn canvass is the famous **Tropic of Scorpio** by the great Spam! How can this have happened? Have they no soul?”

“Come on!” cried Beta urgently. “We’ve got to get out!”

She ran on, with the Artist dawdling behind, in shocked disbelief at the damage strewn ahead. A pile of bricks had been dismantled and its constituent parts used as missiles to crack glass cabinets, punch holes in paintings, smash the faces of sculpted children and to lie in a heap at the foot of a chipped and nearly unrecognisable statue of a naked woman.

“It *is* the Illicit Party!” exclaimed Beta. “Look at that!”

She pointed at some coarsely sprayed graffiti across a series of sketches of country scenes. **Rupert Rules OK!** read one. **The Truth!** read another.

“They can’t even spell!” remarked the Artist bitterly, pointing at the words sprayed along the length of a toppled statue: **Death To The Avent Guard!** “All this Art! All this Culture! Priceless! Immeasurable! Uninsurable! Destroyed forever! I hate the bastards who did this! I hate, detest and loath them!”

We ran down corridors, passing only one figure: a capybara sprawled apparently drunk by a frame that had been pulled to the floor and its canvass torn out and ripped into shreds scattered across the gallery. In another near encounter, we heard the sound of shouting, chanting and destruction coming from a gallery to one side as we dashed past without being seen. The Artist bent his head back and grimaced as a painting came crashing to the ground, and the glass protecting the surface shattered into jagged fragments. Our good fortune in avoiding any encounter with the perpetrators eventually came to an end, and this was when we entered the main hall where we at last came face to face with those responsible for the vandalism.

The enormous space which had before seemed cathedral-like in its solemn majesty and timelessness, now resembled the aftermath of a hurricane or earthquake.

Enormous statues, including one of a scorpion, lay shattered in fragments on the gallery floor. A statue of Superman stood beheaded over the shattered glass cabinets in which his head was now resting. A mediæval triptych representing the temptation of Christ was covered with mud and had the javelin from one of the Spartan sportsmen embedded into its wooden surface. In amongst all this destruction more devastation was being wrought. A group of gorillas in black leather costumes were gleefully tossing antique pottery to each other. Three or four small dragons were tearing up the fabric of an enormous still life portrait of some flowers. Others were bludgeoning sculptures and paintings with the fragments of others. A stone club originally brandished by a stone Samson to demolish sinners was now being used to knock out chips from a monstrous statue of Snow White, whose face was now abused to an extent no human could possibly withstand. An array of video screens was smashed in by a large weasel brandishing the stone arm of a wart hog.

The Artist stood transfixed in horror. “That was a priceless Grillade! That was Peccadillo’s finest painting! That was the most important spiritual painting of the Parmesan School. And that mass of paper, wood and cardboard is all that remains of Eponymous Borscht’s greatest masterpiece!”

“What shall we do?” I asked in more practical concern. It seemed unlikely we could get across the main hall unnoticed.

“I suppose we’ll just have to hope they’re too preoccupied to concern themselves with us!” Beta answered optimistically. “But I don’t really want to risk it.”

We stood petrified in the shadows of the Art Gallery’s columns, unable to go forward and equally unable to turn back. However, our indecision was resolved after not too long, less by choice than circumstance. A group of eurypterids, some seven or

eight feet long, were throwing broken chunks of sculpture at an enormous abstract painting just above an arch, and although their aim was not generally very good, some of their missiles hit the canvass, causing fragments of heavily layered oil paint to crack off and fall as polychromatic stalactites to the floor. The Artist mumbled to himself with abhorrence: "Don't they know it's a priceless Schwarzstein!"

Then driven mad with Artistic rage, he burst out from where he hid and ran towards them. "Stop it! Stop it! This is madness! Stop it!"

The eurypterids stopped just as he had bid, but not out of respect. They turned round and jeered at him. He also attracted the attention of a group of hyenas who had been chewing up a wooden Madonna and a velociraptor whose vicious claw had been shredding a painting of some naked women having dinner in a pigsty. They surrounded him, laughing and jeering.

"Just stop it! Do you hear!" the Artist shouted bravely. "Don't ruin masterpieces which have survived hundreds and thousands of years. I beg of you! Leave them alone!"

"It's a flipping Artist!" laughed a hyena.

"A flipping avant-garde Artist, I bet!" sneered the velociraptor. "He's probably painted some of this stuff! What would the great Rupert think of that?"

The dinosaur clouted the Artist on the face causing him to collapse to the floor and out of our sight underneath the jeering predators.

Beta looked at me in horror. "What are they going to do to him?"

"I don't think we should stay to find out!" I replied, running full pelt across the main hall, jumping over broken statues and glass. Beta ran behind me, and very soon overtook me, demonstrating again her better ability to run over and around obstacles.

Our spurt took us through the main entrance, past the shattered glass where the shop had been: its books, postcards and posters spread torn all around the hallway. We darted down the steps, past the blood-stained body of the pig who had been guarding the entrance. His snout was a bloody mess and his coat was badly ripped. He snorted mournfully as we tripped down the steps, a pool of blood in front of him in which could be seen the image of a bearded figure in a halo reflected from the mural above the arch.

There were more Illicit Party supporters and others scattered about the Art Gallery's gardens, but they were milling about with rather less purpose, and even seemed to be in cheerful holiday mood. Some were idly sitting around a statue of a large bear which they showed no interest in vandalising, and rather more in eating their sandwiches. Beta and I ran along the pathway leading out of the Art Gallery, past the sleeping figure of the first guard we had met, still unaware of the malicious damage being perpetrated inside.

Once out of the Art Gallery grounds, Beta and I stood by a tall lamp-post beside an ornamental hedge, panting and hawking in the late afternoon sunshine.

"That was horrible! Horrible! All that destruction! And who's to know what they'd have done to us if they'd caught us!" Beta said through short gasps. "I hope that's the last time I get a fright like that!"

I nodded sympathetically and sincerely. "So do I!"

24

Only a furlong from the Art Gallery, Beta and I were at last indisputably in the Suburbs. In the early evening sun it seemed so much the peaceful haven I remembered it, sheltered by the weight of its very presence from the disorder and chaos that had pursued us since the Election. The avenues and streets were lined by a comforting array of lamp-posts and mature trees; the neatly trimmed hedges and lawns guarded by plastic garden gnomes kept a decent distance from the pavement; and television aerials and satellite dishes decorated every roof.

“I can’t believe the Truth is here!” Beta exclaimed. “I can’t imagine anywhere less likely.”

This was difficult to dispute. It was, after all, this very assumption which had originally persuaded me to leave the Suburbs and seek the Truth elsewhere. “*It is* where the Truth is supposed to be though!”

“Where do you suppose we ought to start looking?” Beta wondered, regarding a cat dozing idly on the doorstep of a semi-detached house. “Should we knock on people’s doors and ask?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

Song birds tweeted in the tall trees above our heads and swallows glid through the air. Then we heard a rumbling thundering noise which gradually became louder and louder, heralding a centaur in a jacket, suit and tie, galloping along the road and right past us without pausing to glance. Beta watched him disappear down a road distinguished by a red post box at the corner.

“What was that?”

“A commuter returning home,” I surmised.

“He seemed to be in an awful hurry!” Beta said, frowning. “You don’t think he was running away from something?”

“Why would he be doing that? This is the Suburbs. Nothing *ever* happens here. If anything happens it’s somewhere else. Not here. The most dramatic thing to happen here is when a bus is late or there’s a power cut.”

Beta nodded. “I’m sure you’re right. It seems *very* quiet, I must admit.”

We strolled along, occasionally attracting stares from elderly women twitching lace curtains who had probably never seen anyone dressed like Beta in their streets. A pig in a three piece suit wandered by, carrying a newspaper and umbrella in one trotter, and a briefcase in the other. He stared at Beta from the corner of his eye, trying hard to disguise his curiosity.

Every road seemed much the same as every other, and we were soon lost in a maze of identical streets, cars parked in the drives of semi-detached houses and numbers on the doors, just above the vertical slit of the letter box, for the postmen’s benefit. It was in one street much the same as the others we first saw signs that the Suburbs might not be quite as peaceful as we imagined. A few cars had smashed windscreens and the entrails of radios strewn over the seats and onto the pavement where the doors had been wrenched open. Dustbins were lying on their sides, with cereal packets, empty detergent bottles and discarded newspapers spilling out onto the pavement. We stepped over the rubbish, and past the crystal fragments of a car window. A newspaper raised itself up from the ground in a sudden gust, and billowed against a hedge. The pages divided themselves and scattered their separate ways on the

herbaceous borders and heathers of a front lawn.

“Help me! Help me!” cried a voice from an upstairs window in one of the houses. We glanced up to see a child in a school uniform waving at us. “Call the police! Get help!”

“What’s wrong?” shouted Beta, standing by the gate.

“We’ve been attacked! Robbed! It’s horrible! My hands have been tied! I don’t where Mummy and Daddy are!”

“We’ll help!” said Beta determinedly, pushing open the gate and running up the drive to the front door, which we could see now had been forced open on its hinges.

I followed her, and into the hallway where clothes were lying scattered about and a picture of a countryside scene had been violently thrown to the ground and broken across the back. An ugly red patch was smeared on the pale floral wallpaper and jagged fragments of a hall mirror lay splintered on the floor. I dashed up the stairs to where Beta was opening doors and looking inside. She disappeared into a bedroom marked by a tiny floral name-plate, and I followed. Inside was the child, her hands tied behind her back, a hanky tied loosely around her throat where it had presumably been used as a gag and a fresh red and blue bruise beginning to swell under her eye. Her face was a mess of tears and her legs were tied together at the ankles and knees by sheets that had been ripped off the bed and torn into strips. The bedroom had all the paraphernalia of childhood - toys, videos, cassettes, clothes and comics - thrown all around the place. The doors of her cupboards were open and boxes of more toys threatened to fall out. A large poster of four young men carrying guitars and signed by each was torn across the middle.

“It was horrid! Beastly!” sobbed the girl as we undid her bindings. “These

horrid people burst into the house while I was watching telly...” She pointed at a screen which had been thrown onto the floor, its wires pulled out and the glass shattered. “They hit me. They threw things around. They destroyed my teddy. Then they tied me up.”

“Who were they?” Beta asked.

“I don’t know! They all wore black leather. One was a horrid black hog with horrible horrible big fangs and a black beret. I don’t know where Mummy and Daddy are. Why didn’t they help me? Why didn’t they stop them?”

“I’ll ring the police!” I announced, doing what I believed was the best thing.

I strode out of the bedroom into the hallway, wondering where the telephone might be. I pushed open a door on the opposite side of the landing and looked at another ruined bedroom. I saw a telephone sure enough, but smashed to pieces, the bare wire of its leads stretched across the room. This room was ruined just as much as the other. A wardrobe had been pulled over, framed photographs lay shattered about on the carpet and another television was destroyed. I heard a small moan from behind the bed. I strode round to find a middle-aged woman, half of her clothes ripped off, with bloodstains on her bared breast and a nasty gash across her face. Like her daughter, her hands and arms had been tied together, and her mouth was gagged by a silk scarf stuffed into it and trailing over her chin.

I pulled the scarf out. “Are you all right?” I asked pointlessly, as it was obvious she wasn’t. “Is there anything I can do?”

The woman looked through me with a wild stare. “They raped me,” she moaned. “They raped me!”

I bent over to pick her up, but with a sudden spasm of violent energy she

angrily pushed herself off. She collapsed back onto the side of the bed, a trickle of blood dripping from a reddened mouth. "They raped me. Raped me. Why? Why?"

"Can I help in any way?"

"They raped me. Me! Raped..."

I backed out of the bedroom. The best course of action was clearly to get help. I ran down the stairs to look for another telephone: there must be more than one! And indeed there was. In the living room, but similarly destroyed and by the sprawled body of a man in a cardigan, slippers and polyester trousers, whose face lay in a puddle of blood studded with small white pebbles which I recognised with shock as being his own teeth. He hadn't been tied up like his wife and daughter, as presumably there hadn't been any need. I rushed out of the living room, too frightened to determine whether he was alive, and charged up the staircase to rejoin Beta who was comforting the school-girl.

"What's wrong?" Beta asked as I entered. "You look terribly pale."

I didn't know how to answer. The image of the blood on the pile carpet amidst the smashed ornaments and furniture and loose scraps of paper were too clear in my mind. "The phones have been smashed!" I at last said. "We'll have to use a public telephone!"

The child nodded her head. "There's one just round the corner."

"We'll go there," I said with some determination. "All of us. Together!"

"Why all of us?" queried Beta with a frown.

I swallowed the bolus of spittle that was rising in my throat. "It's better if we all go!" I said with conviction. "We'll get the police. And an ambulance. They can sort it out."

“An ambulance? Why? What’s happened?” Beta asked.

“We’d better go!” I repeated with urgency. “Now!”

“I don’t want to go!” said the child. “I want to stay here! With Mummy and Daddy!”

I felt hopeless in my dilemma, but thankfully Beta assessed the horror of the situation with more clarity than the child. “We’ll come back straight away. Don’t worry! You’ll be alright.”

Reluctantly, the child agreed, and so we walked out of the house through the scattered ruin of her family’s possessions, past the wreckage of the car and along the road, where we could now see that other houses had been attacked. I felt extremely disorientated. This could not be happening! This was the Suburbs. This was not right.

Inevitably, we found that the telephone box had been vandalised. The telephone had been wrenched off the wall, the glass windows of the red kiosk were smashed and a pool of loose change was scattered along the edge of the pavement.

When the child saw the damage she burst into a fresh torrent of tears. “We’ll *never* get the police! Why did they do it? What are they doing? And where’s Mummy and Daddy?”

“We’ll find another telephone box,” said Beta soothingly.

“We won’t! They’ll all be smashed! It’s not fair! I’m going back home! I want my Mummy and Daddy!”

She then dashed off, her thin white legs flicking back and forth as she ran.

Beta looked startled. “We ought to chase after her!” she said, staring at me. “She can’t be just abandoned!”

I couldn’t deny the moral urgency of Beta’s assertion, but I wasn’t at all sure I

knew what we could do. I was frightened of returning into the girl's home where her parents were in such a bloody state. However, I left such thoughts behind me as I dashed after Beta back where we'd come. We ran round the corner of the avenue where her home was, to see her screaming and running off at a tangent down a cul de sac to one side. She was soon out of sight, her sandaled feet pacing along a path between houses, and we saw what had frightened her.

I had never seen such ugly gargoyles before in my life, and certainly not in the Suburbs. And there were so many of them. Cruel faces, with vicious fangs and horns, wings protruding from the backs of some of them, destroying cars, smashing windows and shouting at each other. Most of the gargoyles were no more than three or four feet high, but one particularly ugly specimen, with the face of an eagle and savage long claws towered high above the others, whooping with joy at the destruction meted about him. Beta and I similarly turned about and dashed down the pathway, marked by a sign featuring the silhouette of a walking man.

We ran and ran through a maze of paths running alongside and behind the gardens of deceptively peaceful streets, having lost all sight of the child, and now much more concerned about our own safety and survival. At last the paths emerged into another avenue, much the same as the ones we'd left but thankfully lacking in any evidence of vandalism or violence. We paused by a telephone pole, leaned against a garden wall, and panted in short urgent breaths.

"Who were *they*?" Beta asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. They don't come from the Suburbs. They must have come here looking for the Truth."

"They don't look like they were particularly interested in the Truth. Whatever

they're here for, it's not to find the Truth. The only thing they seemed interested in was destruction!"

We walked on, unsure which direction to go and in any case totally lost in the grid of streets. It seemed here at least there was nothing to worry about, although when we tried to use a public telephone box to alert the police we found the lines were uncharacteristically dead. I put down the receiver with disgust.

"Surely, they must know what's going on!" Beta remarked. "All that couldn't be going on without the police knowing!"

My Suburban faith in the police persuaded me to agree with her, although I was troubled that an institution that normally cleared away the evidence of car accidents and suicides in the Suburbs with commendable haste and efficiency should be so absent when most needed. I nodded, and walked along with Beta, squeezing her hand tight as much to comfort myself as her.

It was then that we saw the figure of the Artist approach us, unsteadily wandering from side to side along a road that was mysteriously free of traffic. As he came closer we could see a bloody gash disfiguring his chin, caked blood on his upper lip beneath his nostrils and his smock badly ripped and revealing much of his hairless chest. When he saw us, he ran his fingers through his blood-soaked hair, and smiled weakly.

"They set fire to the Art Gallery! They burnt it down! All those masterpieces! All the Biriyanis, Tortellinis and Salamis! Destroyed forever! Unforgivable! Absolutely unforgivable!"

"Are *you* alright?" asked Beta with some concern. "We were terribly afraid they might have killed you."

The Artist bent his head down and despairingly clasped his forehead in his paint-splattered fingers. "I'm alright. I think. But the Art Gallery is totally destroyed. Everything! Up in smoke! Never to be seen again. The treasures of the nation. A priceless national heritage! Gone forever. Forever!"

"How did you escape?" I wondered.

"I don't know. I don't know at all. They were distracted I suppose: the vandals. They found something else to do. Perhaps it was some other thing they wanted to destroy. I was just left. On the floor. By the foot of what was left of Pork's **Monument to Eternity**. I just lay there, with my tongue on what used to be a tooth." He opened his mouth to show a gap in the front of his mouth where an incisor should have been. "I was in such pain. There was blood in my mouth. And my eyes. Seeping through my hair. I don't know where my beret is. I just lay there. I could hear all the destruction. It was horrible! Humiliating! And then I smelt smoke. I didn't know what it was at first. My nose was so caked with blood I couldn't smell very well. Then I saw a cloud of smoke waft over the Art Gallery. Then I realised. They were burning down the Art Gallery. Not content with what they'd done to the contents, they were destroying the entire flipping edifice."

"But you're alright," said Beta soothingly. "You're alive. They didn't kill you."

"I wish they had. My life is nothing now. Much of my own work must have been destroyed in the fire. I got up. There were still globules of blood dripping on the floor in front of me. But I got up. Somehow. I couldn't stand very well. I had ... I *have* such a horrible headache. But I crawled through the gallery. I don't know how. Over all the ruins of great Art. The Culture. The essence of civilisation. And then out of the Art Gallery. I saw flames behind me. Yellow, red, black flames. And smoke. But I got

out. And then I ran and ran.”

“Were many Illicit Party people there?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t look. There might have been. If they were, they weren’t interested in me any more. I just ran and ran. And then I just fell on the grass and lay there. I was sick. So sick. I just lay in blood and vomit, with the smell of smoke from the Art Gallery. It billowed out of the entrance. Consuming irreplaceable classics. My own **Untitled No. 24**. My own **Esoterica Divined**. Even my **Omega Psi: Surrender**. All destroyed! Consumed by fire, now only a memory and never to be seen again!

“As I lay there consumed by misery and despair, I felt someone’s hands on my back. I drew back, thinking it was another Illicit bastard. Or worse. But it was a centauress. She had come from the Country and had galloped to the Art Gallery for shelter. She was very concerned about me, and wiped off some of the blood from my face with a handkerchief. She knelt down beside me and told me why she’d been running away from the Country. There had been a fire in the forest where she’d lived, and she’d fled from it. She was very worried that her home might have been burnt down in the flames, but it was too perilous for her to return.”

“That must have been the fire we saw!” Beta exclaimed. “Did she know what had caused it?”

“She didn’t say. All she knew was that there had been a fire. But she said that she had seen many many of these people, Illicit Party, Black Party, and others who were not in any political grouping. There were dragons, wyverns, gargoyles, minotaurs, all sorts rampaging through the Country. People she had never seen before. She had no idea where they came from, but she told me that it was certain that they were en route to the Suburbs on this damnable quest for the Truth. She was terribly

worried for the health of her foals who had been at school during the fire. She had no idea where she might find them, as their school is a long way from her home. Schools are scattered about thinly in the Country, and they travel there each day by bus. She said she had seen hundreds of these monsters and political activists descending on the Suburbs from all directions. They're all converging here and causing havoc wherever they go."

"Did she actually see any evidence of this?" I wondered.

"Oh yes! Yes, she had. Although she said that what they had done to the Art Gallery was the worst she'd seen. I looked back at the building where flames were bursting through the windows and yet there was no fire service to extinguish it. Where were they? What's happened? Has totally lawlessness, anarchy and chaos descended on this land?"

I reflected on the destruction we had just seen and had to agree that that was exactly what had happened.

"Even here? In the Suburbs? How can this be?" the Artist bewailed. "The centaress said she had seen houses ransacked, farms attacked by gangs of grotesque monsters who were devouring all the livestock. She saw a pack of manticores attack a herd of sheep and tear them apart limb from limb. A smilodon was tearing at the throat of a young mastodon. And she even saw a tyrannosaurus swallow a pig whole in a few short gulps. She was understandably worried about her family and, of course, herself. Normally centaurs have no natural enemies except alcohol and mange, but even they can't cope with carnosaurus or dragons."

"Nor can anyone else!" Beta said, with a shiver.

"The centaress had galloped a long way before she came to the Art Gallery.

She said she had no idea where she ought to go. Everywhere was full of gangs of these people. Not all of them were violent, she said. Some were like pilgrims looking for the Truth as if they were heading for Mecca. There were people of all sorts. Some from the City. Some from all over the Country. Many, of course, came by car or van, and there were dreadful traffic jams on the Country's roads which are really not designed for that kind of volume."

The Artist paused, and wiped his nose from which a fresh trickle of blood was emerging. He glanced quizzically at the red stain on the back of his hand. "The centaress was no doctor. She really couldn't do more than talk to me. And then she galloped off. Probably back to the Country. I decided to come to the Suburbs. This seemed the safest possible place to come. But before she left, she told me more about the foul things she had seen."

"What sort of things?" I wondered.

"Like this car she saw being attacked in a village. It was an enormous car. Totally unsuited for Country roads. How it had ever got there, she couldn't say. Perhaps with so much traffic on the roads and all the police diversions it had simply got lost. All these Black Party people... At least I think they were Black Party from how she described them. All dressed in black leather, she said. They were all piling on top of the car. They were shaking the vehicle from side to side. And then the people inside got out. There was a hippopotamus, a rhinoceros and some others she said..."

"I think we know the car you mean!" Beta remarked. "Was there a dog as well and a fat man?"

The Artist frowned. "I don't know. I wasn't there. I can't remember whether she mentioned any other people. But it's not often you see such large pachyderms

driving around in the Country. Most cars aren't big enough! But I remember she said there was a hippopotamus and a rhinoceros. And they were probably foreigners too, she said. They didn't seem at all sure what to do. Anyway, she didn't say very much. She simply said she had seen them come out of the car and try to fight off the vicious leopards and coyotes who were besieging it. Of course, that wasn't too difficult for big animals like them. At least not individually. And then she saw two allosauruses appear and the fight was a lot less even. The car was totally destroyed. I think she said that the people attacking it just pulled it completely to pieces."

"And what happened to Wilma and Wayne? The two people in the car?" Beta asked anxiously.

"I don't know. The centauress didn't say. Perhaps she didn't know. They may have got away for all I know. But without their car: that's for certain!"

We mused on the news for a few moments. Beta was clearly very upset by it, and squeezed my arm tightly to her side. "How can there be *so* many horrible things happening in one day? What's happening?"

The Artist sat down by the side of a wall, behind which could be seen the twitching curtain of a nervous occupant, distressed either by the sight of the Artist's wounds or the fear that he might inconveniently demand assistance. "I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go. I've stood at a bus stop for ages waiting for a bus, but none arrived. I don't know how I can find my way home. And I am trepidatious regarding any encounter with these monsters that have been unleashed into our midst."

We sat by the Artist who had become uncharacteristically silent, while nursing the unpleasant gash on his forehead.

Beta squeezed my hand. "All these horrible horrible things!"

While we sat there, we saw another familiar figure approach us, carrying a baby in a kind of pouch around her chest. It was Una walking along the street, looking nervously from side to side as if expecting to see some more horrors emerge. Beta stood up and walked into the middle of the empty road waving her arms from side to side. Una saw us, waved back and without increasing her stride headed towards us.

"How are you? What are you doing here? Why aren't you still recuperating at the Embassy?"

Una looked sadly into Beta's eyes, clutching her baby close to her breast. "I thought the Suburbs might be the place to come. Everyone else is coming here. They might be coming to find the Truth, but I thought I might come here, find a job, find somewhere to live, start a new life for me and my baby." She was wearing a long dress that was really a little large for her and came almost down to her ankles.

"How did you get here?" I wondered.

"Oh, I hitch-hiked. I went to this motorway junction carrying my baby and stuck my thumb out into the road. I didn't really care where anyone was going, but since most people were going to the Suburbs I thought it was the place to go. I didn't wait long. Less than half an hour, anyway. A van stopped. It was spray-painted all sorts of colours with lots of slogans on the outside, including 'THE TRUTH'. There were plenty of young people inside. They weren't from any particular political party or religious group, though they were mostly sympathetic to the Red Party. They were very glad anyway that they had won the Election. There was a girl with very long hair wearing a colourful thin cotton dress. Another girl with her head shaved wearing only a pair of black leather shorts. A man with short spiky hair, covered in earrings and

studs who kept smoking all the time. There was a pig driving who also had ear-rings and a woolly hat over his head. They had heard about the search for the Truth, and decided to join the flow of people heading to the Suburbs.”

“Why were they doing that?” Beta asked. “I thought it was mostly just Illicit Party people coming here.”

“Oh, everyone’s coming. Not just Illicit Party. I suppose it’s something that appeals to a lot of different people: the Truth, that is. They said that in different ways they’d each been searching for the Truth already in the City commune they lived in. They’d sought for it through religion, mysticism and meditation with the assistance of gurus and paperbacks. It seemed right to them that they should be in the midst of all the excitement.”

“And where are they now?” I asked, looking down the empty street.

“I don’t know. I lost them. It took a long time to get to the Suburbs. There were a lot of cars on the road. It was a very slow long journey. A number of different vehicles are heading here: carriages, vans, cars, coaches, anything with wheels. I’ve never seen anything like it. When we got here, it was not at all obvious where to go. The pig drove us all around the place. The streets were very full, and almost all of them were full of cars parking in all the available spaces, blocking people’s drives and on the pavement. There were all sorts of people wandering about. Some like the people in the van I was in. Some dressed in Rupert suits. Some in the sort of clothes that people in the Suburbs wear: I suppose they must have been ordinary Suburbanites. And then we saw these horrid monsters loom up in the street ahead of us!”

“Monsters?” asked Beta.

“I don’t know what else to call them. Dwarves with faces on their chests.

Things a bit like vultures and a bit like rats. Things with long cruel fangs and vicious claws. I've never seen things like that before in my life. And neither had the others in the van. These monsters chased after the van, and there really wasn't space to turn round. The driver reversed the van backwards, but there were cars behind us and we couldn't go back further. As the monsters approached, they were smashing other cars and really looked very dangerous. I don't know when the decision was made or whether it was wise, but the doors of the van were thrown open and we all ran out. The pig jumped out as well, but he was suddenly descended on by all these winged monkeys. I didn't want to look back. All I was interested in was my baby. I didn't want him to get hurt! I just run and run. Past all the damage that's been done in the Suburbs and the fires that have been started, and then I got here. It seemed nice and quiet. No cars. No chaos. And I've been wandering around here ever since."

"But why are you here at all?" Beta asked. "Why aren't you still in the Embassy?"

"The Cat Embassy? No. Haven't you heard the news?"

"The News?" I asked. "No. Why? What's happened?"

"The Cat Kingdom's being invaded. It started last night. There were rocket attacks on the capital city, Felis, which razed the Royal Palace to the ground and may well have killed the King. The Canine Republics with the assistance of the Illiberal Socialist Republics have declared war on the Cat Kingdom. There are Dogs and others overrunning the country. Mice and Dogs who live in the Kingdom are assisting the invaders. Cats are being slaughtered indiscriminately. It sounds really appalling! When the news broke at the Embassy there was total chaos. All the Embassy staff were running about. They didn't know what to do. No one really knows what's happening

in the Cat Kingdom. It's all a horrid mess! There are radio broadcasts from Mice declaring their own republic. And there are uncorroborated reports that the Illiberal Socialist Republics are behind most of the worst violence."

"So what did you do?" Beta wondered.

"I didn't know what to do when I was first told the news. I hoped that maybe my plight would have made it easier for me. But a Cat came into my room and told me that they were abandoning the building. They'd heard that there was a likelihood that the Embassy might be attacked. In some of the other Cat embassies round the world, especially those in countries who are uncertain in their support for the Cat Kingdom, the embassies had been attacked and burnt to the ground by Dogs and Mice and others who have grudges against Cats. She warned me that it was probably safer for me to leave. The Ambassador had already left and has gone into hiding. She was very worried about her own safety. As she told me, however imperfect the Cat Kingdom and its King might have been, it had at least represented an internationally recognised force sympathetic to the Feline cause. She was frightened that the Feline diaspora would begin again. She was at least grateful that she wasn't living in the Cat Kingdom.

"That's why I left the Embassy, while all the Cats and the staff were shredding papers and erasing computer disks. There was an awful amount of panic amongst the staff, many of whom had already abandoned the building, and those left were worried about their jobs and probably their very lives. I was given this dress to wear - it was the best fit they could find - and this pouch for my baby, and then I had to go into the street again. It wasn't easy. I had to make my way through a crowd of desperate-looking Cats who were pressed against the gates and clamouring for information and advice, and some Mice and Dogs who were shouting abuse and throwing beer cans

and stones at the Embassy and at the Cats. I was terribly frightened for my baby. I clutched him so close to my breast I thought he might suffocate.”

“And that’s why you decided to come to the Suburbs?” Beta surmised.

“Exactly. Where else could I go? The City’s totally failed me. I can’t return to Unity. I thought a borough famous for its peace, calm and stability was by far the best place to come. I’m not in the slightest bit interested in finding the Truth.”

The Artist coughed weakly. His hand was cupped over the wound on his cheek which had started to seep a small trickle of blood. “I ought to be taken to a hospital,” he remarked softly. “I could get lockjaw or gangrene if I’m untreated.”

“Of course you should!” said Beta with alarm. “We should have thought.” She glanced at me. “Where shall we go?”

I shrugged a shoulder helplessly. “I don’t know. This part of the Suburbs is as unknown to me as it is to you.”

“Well, we’ll have to go somewhere,” said Beta determinedly.

Una pointed back in the direction she’d come: “There’s some shops and a post office I passed on the way here. Perhaps there’ll be a hospital or something near there.”

I nodded. “It’s possible.”

On that flimsy advice, we walked in the direction Una indicated, under a sky that was gradually filling with the first substantial clouds I had seen for several days, but occasionally let our shadows stretch to our side as we walked. Beta looked at Una’s baby who was fortunately fast asleep and wholly unaware of his surroundings.

“Were there any awful things happening in the City like we’ve seen and heard about here in the Suburbs?” she asked.

Una stroked her baby's head and reflected. "Not as bad as here, I think. Not as far as I know, anyway. I think everyone's been leaving the City and coming here. Mind you, when I left the Ambassadorial district, I did pass by the Academy and there seemed to be some trouble there."

"What sort of trouble?" I asked. "Like at the Art Gallery?"

"Art Gallery?"

"It's been ransacked, firebombed, vandalised, ruined!" the Artist bewailed. "Masterpieces lost forever! A cultural heritage in smoke!"

"No, not as bad as that!" Una said with some concern. "Did they really do all that to the Art Gallery?"

"And worse!" emphasised the Artist.

Una raised her eyes in horror, but restrained herself to an account of what she'd seen of the Academy. "There was a demonstration outside. All sorts of people. Some throwing stones and books at the building. The police were guarding it, in riot gear. They were obviously prepared for things to get very disagreeable. Some academics were being led out of the building, their heads down and with police plastic shields over them to protect them from the missiles. I don't know why they were being attacked like that. Perhaps it was for their political views. I heard that a lot of academics came out openly on one side or another of the political spectrum during the Election. Perhaps that's what was upsetting the demonstrators. I didn't really want to find out more. I just headed for the nearest motorway junction."

The way ahead soon lost the deceptive calm we'd been enjoying. The road became full of disconsolately wandering people, carrying bags and suitcases, while all around them were the battered ruins of abandoned cars and vans. Most of the houses

remained intact, although they had broken windows, damaged hedges and garbage spilt over their drives. Some of the houses, however, had suffered considerably worse than others: trails of smoke still rising through blackened and charred roofs and smashed possessions scattered over neatly mown lawns and tangling in the geraniums in the flower beds.

There was no particular direction in which the mass of people were heading. Some were wandering towards us. Some in the same direction as us. Some had abandoned any pretence of going anywhere at all, and sat in huddled groups on their luggage by the roadside, their eyes wide open and their faces pale in disbelief and shock. Beta grabbed both my hand and that of Una, who seemed as much in need of comfort as either of us. We soon came to the grounds of a community centre, in comforting red brick and white painted railings. It hadn't escaped unscathed from the violence and destruction: many windows were smashed, a van marked **Suburbs Community Project** was lying on its side, wheels still spinning in the breeze which had noticeably picked up strength, and the walls were sprayed with graffiti which, amongst other things, declared that this was a **Black Party Republic**.

In the grounds of the community centre was a huddled mass of dispossessed and miserable, sitting in groups on the grass, with cups of hot tea grasped in their hands and many with blankets around their shoulders. Presiding over all of this misery was the bearded gentleman whom we had met the day before in the City and who had advised us to come to the Suburbs in our pursuit of the Truth. He looked up when he saw us, and strode towards us over the legs of the homeless Suburbanites and their children. He handed the stack of paper cups and the tea urn he was carrying to a centaur who was helping him in his charitable work.

“Oh dear me! Dear me!” he said with sympathy, looking at the Artist and Una. “What a nasty gash! And such a helpless baby! Come inside the both of you!” He indicated the entrance to the community centre where a nurse was standing by a piglet who was playing with the remnants of a **Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted** sign. He put his arms around both Una and the Artist, and eased them in that direction.

Before leaving, he smiled at us again with his infectious smile. “I’m so glad you were able to bring these poor unfortunates here. There are so many victims of this quest for the Truth. So many who’ve lost their homes or been maliciously and randomly attacked! I just hope that I can be of some small assistance to them in this their most urgent hour of need. I take it that you have come here to pursue your great idealistic quest.”

Beta nodded. “But it seems so irrelevant now with all the awful things that are happening here. There hardly seems any point now to looking for the Truth any more.”

The gentleman nodded, still smiling but with a concerned frown on his face. “I doubt that very many of those supposedly seeking the Truth are really here for any other purpose than to cause mischief. And a mischief which is inflicting so many casualties! But your pursuit of the Truth is an altogether more noble endeavour. It is not my place to advise you to do anything, but do not be unnecessarily disheartened by those who pervert a worthwhile cause. If it is something worth doing, then it is worth continuing despite the evils visited on so many in its name.”

With that the gentleman led the Artist, Una and her baby up the small concrete staircase to the community centre entrance, where the nurse took the Artist from him and scrutinised his cheek with professional care and attention. They then disappeared inside the building, leaving us by the kerbside in front of several hundred miserable

people, many in distressing silence broken by the muffled tears of the younger children.

In amongst all the people were others who were wandering amongst them, doling out comfort, sympathy and practical help. The centaur was bending down awkwardly to pass down cups of tea, a small dragon was distributing sleeping bags and a woman in denim shorts and tee-shirt was doing much the same with heavy grey woollen blankets. She saw us, and wandered towards us. It was the Actress whom we'd met in the City, sweating profusely from her exertions and with a dirty smudge across a cheek.

"Well! Fancy meeting you here!" she said, grinning broadly. "Well, not that surprising, I suppose, knowing about your search for the Truth. I don't suppose you've found it yet, have you?"

I shook my head. "We've not really given much thought to it since we arrived."

"Pity. It might end all this flipping senseless violence if someone were to find it! But I don't blame you for not thinking about it much. It's flipping grotesque, what's happening here. You wouldn't believe that the General Election would result in so much blooming chaos. It's a real crisis. I wonder if the government has yet declared a State of Emergency. They blinking well ought to! Look at all this! It's flipping disgusting, that's what it is!"

She turned around to view the people huddled on the grass.

"These aren't the worst cases. They're all inside. Babies and children orphaned. People nearly dead from the vicious attacks they've suffered. Some people who've been nearly burned alive. Some who have lost their minds totally. That Rupert bastard certainly was inspired when he directed his thuggish followers to come to the Suburbs. The place is utterly unprepared and incapable of handling this kind of chaos. I didn't

believe it was nearly as bad as this when I heard about in on the News, but then you don't do you? You hear of all these flipping awful things that happen in the world, but until you actually see it, you just don't flipping know the half of it."

"Why are you here?" Beta wondered. "Shouldn't you be performing in the theatre?"

"In **The Lion of Naples**? I suppose I would if I could. My theatrical career does usually come first, I must admit. But all the theatres are closed down, those that survived the fire-bombing yesterday, that is. I think only the cinemas are open, and not all of those. No, I saw the news about all the awful things that are happening in the Suburbs and immediately volunteered to help. It's only right, isn't it? I can't claim to be a socialist if I'm not prepared to help my fellow compatriot when I can. And anyway, I'd never been to the Suburbs before. From what I've seen of it, it can't always be like this. Most of the time, it must be jolly peaceful. Dead, in fact. And now look at it! Blinking awful!"

She stared across at the ruined semi-detached houses, the church with the weather-vane dropping by a wire down its steeple, the shops with smashed windows and mostly totally gutted of its stock, the shells of previously well-polished automobiles and the garbage and rubbish being blown by the strengthening wind over the road. The evening sun was hidden behind the darkening clouds, and no electric lights shone from the windows of the surrounding houses.

"Are the Suburbs the only place which has suffered?" I wondered, feeling for the desolation that marked my home.

"Mostly yes, I believe. Mind you, it's only what I've seen on television and heard on the radio. Most of the worst of it is here. But there are other places that have

got it quite bad. There's been an eruption of gang violence in some of the poorer parts of the City, for instance. That's not too unusual, of course. It has to be jolly bad for that kind of thing to be newsworthy, and with all this happening in the Suburbs and that invasion in the Cat Kingdom, it must be absolutely dreadful for it to even warrant a small mention. There are pitched battles between gangs of youths of different political and cultural affiliations all over the place. Housing estates have been burnt down, schools ransacked, shops looted. All that sort of thing. Almost normal in some parts of the City, I suppose. It's just the scale of it that's unusual. People have been machine-gunned. Grenades have been thrown. It really does sound gross. And I daresay it'd be worse still, if so many people from the City hadn't left and headed here to the Suburbs."

"Are there very many people from the City here?" I asked.

"Not just the City, of course, but since more people live in the City than in the rest of the country put together, I suppose, yes, there must be. Some areas of the City are apparently almost like ghost towns; so many people have left for here. Particularly those parts of the City where the Illicit Party is particularly powerful. Inevitable I suppose, given that bastard Rupert's call for all his followers to come here. Although, as you probably have already noticed, there are a lot of people here who have absolutely nothing to do with the Illicit Party, supposedly looking for the Truth..."

"Yes," agreed Beta. "We've seen some very strange people. Monsters, gargoyles, all sorts. I've never seen people like that before!"

"I don't know where they've come from," mused the Actress. "I've not seen them myself, but I've heard about them from these poor blinking unfortunate survivors. They really do sound like something out of the ordinary, don't they?"

The Actress looked back at her wards, and then glanced down at the blankets over her arm. She puffed some air through her cheeks. “Well, it’s been nice talking to you. But I’ve got work to get on with! Best of luck with your quest.”

With that, she turned round and waded back through the kneeling and sitting crowds of Suburbanites distributing blankets to those who seemed most at need. Beta looked at me, with a troubled frown. She ran her fingers through her hair to clear it off her face, and pushed it over her shoulders. “I suppose we ought to carry on with our search?” she said with a faint hint of doubt.

I shared her doubt, but I couldn’t think of any real alternative. I nodded, gently squeezed her hand, and then we walked away from the community centre in the direction which seemed least damaged and vandalised. The crowds of people gradually thinned. Families carrying their baggage trudged by, looking neither left nor right, immersed in their own misery. It was probably best that they kept their eyes distracted from the ruins of homes and motor vehicles they were passing by.

Some people just stood or sat by the roadside, abandoning any pretence of going somewhere. It was by a bus shelter, on the plastic seats provided, that we saw another familiar figure, still naked but shivering in the cooler evening air and with a distinct blueness about her shaved head.

“Xenana!” exclaimed Beta, running up to her childhood friend. “Xenana! What are you doing here?”

A brief gap in the deepening cloud let in a shaft of weakening sunlight, illuminating a face with smudged mascara and fading lipstick gazing sadly up at us. “I could ask the same of you, Beta,” she said, unable to prevent a smile creeping over her face as the shaft of sunlight disappeared leaving her again in the shadows. “Still with

your boyfriend, I see. Did you come here for the fun as well?"

She laughed haltingly and slightly hysterically.

"Fun? We didn't expect any fun!"

"I did! Or *we* did, anyway. We thought it'd be fun. Not that it's been any flipping fun at all!" She laughed bitterly. "We thought: the Suburbs, the Truth, all these thousands of people... Let's party! We all loaded into this car one of us had. We had some absolutely brilliant drugs, and we drove here in real party mood. Though it was no flipping party getting here. All that traffic! One long blinking traffic jam from the City to the Suburbs." She laughed again, caught herself and stopped abruptly. "And here we all arrived: all in the mood to party. I'd never been to the Suburbs before. None of us had! We'd no idea what to expect. We thought it'd be at worst boring, at best a good laugh. But it's turned out to be a real bad trip, and none of us had dropped any blooming acid!"

As Xenana launched into another badly tuned laugh, Beta sat down next to her friend, and put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"Where *are* your friends, Xenana? Shouldn't you be with them?"

"I'd love to be!" she exclaimed with another short bitter laugh. "They've got *all* the flipping drugs, if there's any left by now! But when we arrived there was just flipping nowhere to park. We crawled around the Suburbs for flipping hours - or what seemed like hours. We were getting really teed off. And then it was a flipping nightmare! I *couldn't* believe it!" She laughed again. "Out of flipping nowhere they came! Blinking dozens of them! Two dozen at least! I'd never seen people like them before. Real ugly things they were! Real monsters! Just like you see in flipping nightmares. Horrible horrible faces. Cruel fangs. Enormous claws. And laughing and

shouting and cawing. We thought it might've been the drugs, at first. This can't be real! Have you seen these repulsive things?"

Beta nodded.

Xenana looked around her hopelessly. "I've lost my handbag. The worst of it I've also lost my ciggies. And all the reefers I'd rolled for the occasion!" She laughed again in a tone that was dangerously close to crying. "Hamid was the most blitzed. He must have taken something he'd not shared with the rest of us. In retrospect it's probably a blinking good thing he hadn't. He got out of the limo in a sort of stoned good-natured way. He stood there in front of all these dreadful things, like as if they were just naughty primary school children. 'Couldn't you like let me and my friends like just pass by?' he said. They looked a bit bemused themselves. They didn't expect people to talk to them like that. 'Hey, you guys. You can let us pass, can't you?'"

Xenana paused. She wrapped her arms around her as a gust of wind blew by raising Beta's hair up into the air and rustling through the dark foliage of the hedge behind us. Her eyes were wide open and a dark tear of mascara trailed down her cheek.

"They didn't say anything. One of them - a cross between a pig, a horse and a spider - suddenly punched Hamid on the face. From inside the car I saw blood burst out of his nose, and smear down the windscreen as his head slid down. We just screamed. This wasn't a flipping joke any more! This was no blinking fun! We piled out of the car as fast as we could. I started running and running. I didn't flipping care about my handbag or my purse or any flipping thing. I just ran and ran! The monsters didn't stop. One of them grabbed Maria and I could hear her screaming and screaming while I ran. Their scales, feathers and claws made unbearable grating noises just like

their hideous cackling laughs.” She let loose a breathless winded bark of a laugh herself. “I don’t know what happened to the others. As I ran all I could hear were the echoes of Maria’s screams. They pierced through the air like the jagged edge of a saw. My stomach was churning, my chest was pounding and I was feeling jolly ill!”

“But you’re alright now!” Beta said comfortingly.

“I can still hear Maria’s screams. I can still see Hamid’s crushed nose on the windscreen and all that blood and snot smeared there. It was a bad dream! The worst trip imaginable. But a real one! Not one in the flipping head!”

Beta sighed. “This has really been a ghastly day!”

“It *has* been! Everything bad is happening on one day. I blame the Election. It was alright before! Now, it’s chaos. No flipping fun at all! Why are all the bad things happening at once? The News broadcasts we heard on the radio were jolly depressing: we just had to turn it off and listen to cassettes. The siege of the Academy. The theatres closing down. The war in the Cat Kingdom. There was even the news that the famous businessperson, Lord Arthur, had been shot...”

“Lord Arthur?” gasped Beta. “Shot? We only saw him yesterday, didn’t we?”

“You know him, do you?” Xenana asked looking at us both. “Or knew him, I should say. I didn’t know you moved in such illustrious circles! Well, he’s dead now. It wasn’t much of a news story really, coming after all the other things. It seems to be connected with his flipping enormous debts.”

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“Don’t ask me for details. I can’t remember everything the flipping newsreader said. It seems that the lion mixed in some dodgy company. Some of his debtors were criminals of some sort. They’re not the sort I suppose to accept it if you tell them

you're flipping skint! They found him lying dead in some disreputable part of the City. He'd been shot, they said, but not before he'd been tortured or something: I don't know. As I say, he had some jolly dodgy friends!"

"Tortured!" gasped Beta, wide eyed with disbelief. "Tortured? How was he tortured? Did they say?"

"Probably. I don't know. I wasn't really listening. As I say, it was just one of the many flipping dreadful things happening today. I didn't know he was a friend of yours', or I might have listened with more interest!"

"Well, you can't stay here forever!" said Beta. "Shall we walk on?"

Xenana nodded, stood up and accompanied us along the Suburban streets on her absurdly high platform boots. The wind picked up and it was becoming prematurely dark for this early in the evening. A strong gust blew dirt into our faces, and I screwed up my eyes.

"Uurrrgh!" exclaimed Xenana. "What was that?" She glanced at a small drop of moisture that had landed on her arm. "Oh flipping no! It's not blinking raining, is it?"

The pavement became speckled with dark spots on its otherwise dry surface. The drops became heavier and larger, and soon the ground was more damp than dry.

"Oh no! Oh no!" gasped Xenana with horror. "We're going to get soaked! And I've got flipping nothing to put on!"

I was the only one of us at all covered, but this was totally inadequate as the rain picked up intensity and lashed into our faces. My clothes got more and more damp.

"Where can we shelter?" I wondered in alarm, seeing all the available dry spaces being crowded out by the bedraggled refugees. Only the especially stoical or

too despairing to care stayed in the open air.

Beta broke into a trot. "We've got to find somewhere!" she announced, as Xenana and I tried running in step with her.

"Perhaps in one of these houses!" suggested Xenana, pointing at the ruined shells of houses on either side of us: gardens scattered with rubbish beaten down by the rain, sodden newspapers pasted to the pavement and water beating against the carcasses of deserted cars. Without waiting for our assent, she dashed down the drive of a house, chosen merely for its proximity, and straight through the splintered timber of its front door. Beta and I veered after her, as the rain became even more intense, battering and bruising us as we ran, and penetrating my sodden clothes.

We stood in the shelter of the hallway, amongst the detritus of recent destruction, looking through the curtain of rain beating insistently on the driveway, further battering down the broken stalks of flowers bordering the lawn, and dripping off a porch into a sodden puddle on the WELCOME mat. Another gust of wind drove us from the house's entrance and into its dark, unwelcoming interior. My feet crushed on broken glass and fragments of porcelain scattered around an upturned coat-stand. Beta and Xenana huddled together in the shadows by a smashed doorway, only the whiteness of their skin making them at all visible. I pressed the hall light-switch, but no lights came on. This was probably just as well, I reflected, as I didn't wish to know whether the dark smears near where a hall mirror had once stood were bloodstains.

"Your clothes are absolutely saturated!" Beta remarked. "You better take them off to dry!"

"What here? With Xenana here?"

"Don't mind me," she sniffed. "I can't imagine you've got anything that I've

not seen before.”

Beta approached me, carefully treading around the shards of glass, and took my hand. “Shall we sit in the living room? It’s very gloomy, but there’s a sofa.”

We pushed open the damaged door. Xenana hurriedly leapt onto the sofa which was about the only item of furniture not thrown over, but whose upholstery had a deep gash through which we could see a pale welling of foam. A television set trailed across the room, glass scattered from its smashed screen. A standard lamp was wrenched nearly in half over the remains of an audio system. The keyboard of a home computer lay amongst the fragments of ornaments and books scattered about the floor. A gust of wind blew against the lace curtains which was all that protected the room from the torrential rain beating against the shattered uPVC double-glazing.

Beta carefully removed my clothes which damply clung to my skin and placed them on a dining room chair around the splinters of a dining table. I sat on an armchair by the wreckage of an array of book-shelves. “I’ll see if I can find a towel,” she said, walking towards the door.

“You’re not going to blinking walk round the house by yourself!” exclaimed Xenana incredulously. “There’s no saying what you might flipping find!”

Beta hesitated, and then smiled at me. “We can’t just shiver like this. We might catch pneumonia. I’m sure it’s no more dangerous here than anywhere else. Do you want to come with me, Xenana?”

Her friend shook her head. She lay back on the sofa and sighed. “Not now! I’ve only just made myself comfortable. Perhaps your boyfriend might be more foolhardy?”

Beta frowned at me. I was shivering in the cool evening air, the dampness on

my skin spreading through my limbs.

“I don’t think so. We need a towel, and I’m sure I’ll find one.”

With that she determinedly strode out, leaving me alone with Xenana, who yawned as she sprawled along the contours of the sofa.

“I can’t be flipping bothered!” confided Xenana, when Beta had gone. “I’d rather just rest. Mind you!” She glanced around at the shattered furniture. “You don’t think there mightn’t be some ciggies left behind. I could flipping kill for a smoke! Perhaps they’ve got some dope!”

“I shouldn’t think so,” I remarked through my shivers. “Drugs aren’t very popular in the Suburbs.”

“Tuh! Typical. You Suburbanites aren’t famous for your sense of fun.” She scrutinised the devastation strewn about the room. “Still, I bet there’s absolutely tons of decent stuff here, if we could only take it away with us. I’m sure whoever used to live here wouldn’t flipping miss it. If they’re still alive, that is!”

“You don’t think they’ve been killed, do you?” I remarked, reflecting on the motionless, blood-stained body of the young girl’s father.

“After what they flipping did to Maria and Hamid I wouldn’t be at all blinking well surprised. And I bet some of this stuff’s worth a lot. The bits that aren’t broken that is! Perhaps we ought to just take as much as we can.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“Nothing’s flipping right today, if you ask me. Ah! Here’s our fearless explorer.”

Beta came in carrying three large towels, one she handed to me and one to Xenana. She rubbed herself down with the last one. “There’s definitely no one here,”

she announced. "Whoever did all this damage were very thorough. Every room's in a terrible state. There are traces of blood in the kitchen, and knives and things thrown all over the place. It's horrifying." She glanced upstairs. "There's a bathroom here. And the water's still pretty hot. They must have had a full hot water tank before the electricity was cut off." She rubbed the top of her thighs with the towel, and remarked thoughtfully. "It seems a shame to waste it. I think I'll have a quick shower. Maybe that'll wash off some of the horror from all the gruesome things we've seen today!"

"Yes, you do that, Beta," Xenana agreed. "Just keep the door open so we can warn you if any of those horrid monsters come in!"

"I'll have to keep the door open to let some light in. It's terribly dark. And I'm sure it's not nightfall for an hour or more. It's the rain! And it's still pelting down."

We looked at the lace curtains, flapping in the wind, a puddle of water expanding just underneath the window. Beta sighed, and left us for a second time.

Xenana continued her survey of the room, her eyes becoming more accustomed to the dimness. "You Suburban people are *so* rich. All this space and furniture. It makes my bedsit look so tiny. They say it's the City where all the wealth is, but I reckon it must be here in the Suburbs. You Suburbanites commute to the City every day, get paid City incomes but pay far less for anything than I ever have to. This is where the real luxury is. It makes you feel sick!"

She buried her face in the white towel, rubbing off the last vestiges of make-up into a dark smeary wound. I patted my chest with my towel, discreetly holding most of it over the top of my thighs. Through the sound of beating rain, I distinctly heard another rush of water emanating from the shower.

"Mind you, I'd never dream of living in the Suburbs. What sort of flipping life

can it be? All these semi-detached houses! All the hedges, lawns and bowling greens: it's so *flipping* boring! I'd much rather live in the City. We've got everything there! It's the real world. Not some kind of sleepy backwater. I couldn't cope with the flipping tedium. I guess that's why you chose to leave the Suburbs yourself and go to the City. God only knows what possessed you and Beta to leave it again and come back here!"

She took the towel and pushed it hard against her crotch. "God! That feels flipping better!" She smiled at me. "I know what you're looking at," she said lasciviously. "You Suburban people think that nudity and sex are the same thing, don't you?" She blatantly squeezed her crotch, while grinning at my attempts to avert my gaze. "Not that you get much sex here I imagine. You people just don't have a sexual appetite at all. Mind you, you're with Beta now. Is she still a flipping virgin, eh? Or have you had your evil way with her? What about it? Have you had sex with Beta?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"That means yes, doesn't it? She's a good looking girl, don't you think? I don't know how she managed to keep her chastity for so long! And what about me? I bet you think I look good too. I've got a good pair of breasts, haven't I?" She glanced down at her crotch while idly stroking it. "I'm in full working order, I can tell you."

I drew in a deep breath, to suffocate the percussion of my heart, and discreetly piled more of the now damp towel over my groin. Xenana stood up, and sauntered lecherously towards me. "If you like, sweetest, I can show you just how well I'm functioning. I'm sure Beta won't mind. She's an open-minded modern ms!"

I shook my head, feeling sure that she would mind very much. Xenana came right up to me, and placed her hands on my shoulders and looked me directly in the

eyes with an expression that was both inviting and unnerving. I stared back, my powers of resistance crumbling like a towering edifice built on sand.

“Xenana! Just *what* do you think you’re doing?” suddenly demanded Beta’s voice in a strident burst of wrath. “I only have a shower for a few minutes and you’re already trying to seduce him. You’ve not changed at all, have you! No wonder so many people were pleased when you left the Village!”

Xenana took her hands off me, and glared angrily at her friend. “Don’t you flipping well preach to me! Don’t impose blinking Village morality on me! I do what I do because I like it, and I don’t blooming care what people might think!”

“Just keep your hands off him!”

“I can put my flipping hands wherever I jolly well like!”

I anxiously stood up, clutching the towel to my middle, and spread out my palm in a conciliatory gesture. “We really mustn’t argue! We’ve got more pressing worries.” I glanced at my clothes, which were still quite damp, and wondered whether to put them back on.

“He’s right, Xenana!” agreed Beta. “I’m sure you only behaved the way you did because of all the stress we’re under. However, I came back in to say I found plenty of food in the kitchen. We might as well eat it before its goes off!”

“Food!” Xenana gasped. “Why didn’t you say? I’m famished! Let’s go eat! To the kitchen!”

“I’ll fetch it in here. I don’t think it’s safe in there with all the knives all over the place. And there are some nasty stains on the fridge.”

We were soon tucking into the remnants of the larder. Fruit, cakes, biscuits, sandwiches filled with exotic spreads reminiscent of their supposed origins and

breakfast cereals smothered in rich full-cream milk. Xenana crammed as much as she could into her mouth, barely pausing between mouthfuls before stuffing her cheeks with more. “I didn’t know I was so (*munch!*) hungry!” she exclaimed, a dribble of mayonnaise and soy sauce dripping down her chin.

We rested for a while in the ravaged living room, becoming shadows in the encroaching dark, listening to the rain and wind beating against the house. This became gradually less intense, descending to the tempo of drizzle and finally ceasing altogether. My clothes weren’t fully dry, but I had enough of sitting naked with Beta and Xenana, however naked they were themselves, and was glad to put them on again, shivering in their dampness. Beta wandered to the front door, and stood silhouetted against the dark cloudy sky, dark puddles interspersed along the pavement and streams of rain water gushing in torrents along the gutter towards the grilled openings of the drains, occasionally dividing in its course around scattered obstacles of garbage.

“I think we ought to look somewhere else,” Beta remarked. “I don’t like the atmosphere here. All the vandalism! It’s distressing.”

“And what makes you think it’s any better elsewhere?” snapped Xenana, but nonetheless agreeing to leave the house we’d sheltered in for the last few hours and to emerge again into the eerie emptiness and dark of the Suburban streets, unlit by street-lamps, and illuminated by a distant aura of flame. One of the buildings that had been set alight appeared to be a church, although it was too far away to be certain.

We walked along the Suburban avenues, Beta and I avoiding puddles, but Xenana barely aware of their existence from the heights of her platform soles. There was a general calmness that had descended after the rainstorm, and only the evidence of detritus and destruction to remind us that there was still much to be afraid of.

Others were emerging from their shelter, including a family of centaurs and a pig still in his work suit.

Along the middle of the road, unworried by any likelihood of traffic, of which there was no evidence at all, we saw a strange white figure. As it came closer, it became clear that it was Anna wearing a simple long sleeveless white dress, from neck to ankle, who had now shaved her head rather like Xenana, and wore rather less extravagant platform boots. She saw us, and smiled. Xenana also smiled, although she had never met Anna before. Presumably she recognised a kindred spirit.

“Still on your search for the Truth, I see!” said Anna, apparently unflustered by the chaos around her.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Is that why you’re here?”

“In a way. In a way. I thought it might be interesting. Everyone descending on the Suburbs like this. I hadn’t thought - I don’t suppose anyone thought - it would result in so much grief. It’s really jolly frightening! I’ve seen so much devastation. This really *isn’t* the Suburbs I was visiting a week ago. Such a short period of time, and so much has changed. But that, I suppose, is how things *do* change. Everything goes along in its sweet untroubled way and then, - *quelle catastrophe!* - it all comes tumbling down!”

“What have you seen while you’ve been in the Suburbs?” I asked.

“Oh! Many things! So many different depressing things!” Anna remarked, running a hand over her shaved scalp. “I came here alone. I always prefer travelling alone. You see much more that way. More open to opportunity, I guess. It’s been absolutely flipping horrible. I’ve spent most of my time here with a Gryphon I met. I was really jolly frightened of him at first. I thought he might be one of these ghastly

monsters that have turned up here. After all, gryphons are a bit like monsters themselves, - composed of bits and pieces of other animals, - but he was a school teacher. Goodness knows why *he* should be here, but then *everybody's* here, so why not him? I imagine he might have flown here. He was in a dreadful state when I met him. Absolutely dreadful!"

"How was that?" wondered Beta.

"He'd been in a fight, though it's a mystery to me why anyone would ever choose to fight with a gryphon. They're beasts quite capable of looking after themselves. Those beaks and claws! Gracious! Anyway, he'd found these monsters molesting a little girl. Quite grossly, I gathered. Being a school teacher, he felt honour-bound to defend her, but of course these monsters just turned on him. They must have outnumbered him quite badly, because he was very much the worst for it. He'd lost absolutely loads of feathers! He had a nasty cut over one of his eyes. And one of his ears had been very badly cut! But when I met him, he seemed to be recovering well enough."

"Where is he now?" I wondered.

"Oh, I don't know at all. We met some Illicit Party supporters with guns, and ran for our lives. These people were just shooting at everything and everyone. The Gryphon took off into the sky and flew off - although with all those feathers missing, he really wasn't flying that well or confidently. But he'd been good company until then. I felt *much* safer with someone like him as company than I might have done otherwise. As I said, there aren't many people who'd pick a fight with a gryphon. On the other hand, some of the monsters I've seen today are probably more than his equal!"

“Monsters! What kind of monsters?” asked Xenana.

“Oh! The usual kind. A few tyrannosaurs. Velociraptors. Dragons. Manticores. And a whole lot I don’t know the names of. Centaurs with the heads of beetles. Things like pigs with wings and enormous horns. An enormous giant with half his body missing walking on tree trunks. The sort of things you have nightmares about, and certainly don’t expect to meet in the Suburbs! Goodness knows what they’re jolly well doing here. My theory is that they’ve been bussed in by the Illicit Party, but some of these brutes just need an excuse, any excuse, to go on an orgy of violence, destruction and death. It really is flipping awful!”

We turned a corner of the road and wandered down another street much the same as the others. On all sides were ruined homes, shattered cars and dampened-down rubbish. Anna shared Beta’s skill in avoiding puddles, her dress remaining remarkably unstained, which was not a good fortune shared by my dirt-splattered trousers. Xenana chatted to Anna about the City, and they reminisced on places they’d been to and even shared acquaintances. Beta took my hand with a smile, and our wanderings came to seem almost normal and peaceful in the deceptive calm of the dark Suburban streets.

This calm was very rudely shattered by the sound of repeated bangs followed by shouts and screams. We froze, not at all sure where the sounds were coming from. This was repeated by more bangs which sounded very much like machine gun fire. There then came some running, and more spasmodic bangs, louder and more emphatic. Anna glanced at us with fear and urgency.

“We better get off the street. No point running away. They’ll only shoot at us if they see us.”

“Who *are* they?” Beta asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to find out. Down this drive. Into that house!”

Anna indicated a semi-detached house, with a shattered door pulled off its hinges and lying on the drive, behind the high shadow of a hedge cut into the shape of some peculiar birds. We all followed her instructions, and huddled in the doorway while the running, shouting and shooting became louder and more distinct. I glimpsed sparks from a small automatic gun as it sprayed into the street. It was responded to by more gunfire.

Then figures came running into the street, just shadows in the dark but carrying banners and flags. Over the dark bulk of the hedge, I saw President Chairman Rupert’s face on the white back of a flag with the single word **TRUTH** emblazoned on it. “Illicit Party!” hissed Anna softly. “Those flipping bastards are everywhere!” Beta gripped my hand tightly and eased me back into the dark recesses of the hallway.

We didn’t dare look out at the commotion going on in the street, but there was more shouting, more gunfire, some very guttural cries of agony and more frantic running about. We heard a large figure collapse against the hedge and the smashing of glass, whether the window of a house or a car it was impossible to tell. It could not have been very many minutes that we were imprisoned by this alarming soundscape, but every second of it seemed too long. The running, shouting and shooting passed by the house and soon receded into the distance.

We didn’t emerge for some time after that. There was just too much likelihood that there would be stragglers looking for unarmed people such as ourselves, but eventually, and on a hushed sign from Anna, we crept out into the open air. We gingerly peered over the hedge. It had become calm again. There was a flag lying on

the ground, broken in half with the word RUPERT on an otherwise unadorned green background. Its cloth fluttered ferociously in the evening wind, soaking in moisture from the water running by along the gutter.

“We’d better move on,” Anna said determinedly, pushing open the metal gate to the garden, and cautiously looking up and down the street. Then she stepped back.

“Oh God!” she exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” Xenana asked.

“Don’t ask! Let’s just leave quickly! And don’t look at the hedge!”

“The hedge?” Beta asked.

“Just don’t look!”

We dashed out into the street and ran down in the direction away from where the Illicitists had gone. Anna’s advice was wasted on me, as my curiosity impelled me to look at the hedge. A pig in black leather clothes was slumped at its foot, a pool of blood seeping from his skull and mixing in the puddles on the pavement. His face had been totally destroyed and grey, spongy mass lay in the sorry mess of his ruined face. A large flick knife was still gripped tightly in his trotter.

I turned my face away with horror to glimpse another figure I hadn’t noticed before, just by the flag and slumped between two cars. Only his legs and a pool of blood were distinguishable, but I recognised his Rupert suit.

We soon encountered the silhouetted forms of a body of people gathered by a large range rover that had somehow escaped from all the chaos. At first it was difficult to establish who or what these shadows could belong to, and we approached gingerly. It was possible they might be more Illicitists or even monsters, but as we came closer it was clear that there was nothing at all threatening about them. They were incongruous

for the Suburbs, particularly as it would normally be: dressed in finery and ornamentation, no ostentation avoided, and chatting rather noisily and cheerfully. It was as if they were on a day out in the Country, rather than in the midst of the catastrophic annihilation of the Suburbs.

A pig leaned against the hood of the range rover, holding a champagne glass in a trotter fringed by a lace cuff, a large hat with an ostrich feather dipped over his face. Next to him, sitting on the actual bonnet of the vehicle, and amiably chatting to him, was Zitha whom I'd met at the Eternal Party. Other figures stood by, presumably associated with the other intact vehicles parked around in the dark. The only hint of fear in the company was the presence of two tall gorilla bodyguards clasping small automatic fire-arms, who glared at us suspiciously as we approached, but made no attempt to stop us. They had presumably concluded that we were unlikely to cause trouble.

One of the partying figures emerged out of the shadows in a tall conical hat, brandishing a cane. It was the Philosopher whom I'd met at Tudor's house.

"Well, I never!" he exclaimed. "I'd never have thought it possible. So, you came all the way back to the Suburbs in your pursuit of the Truth. Truly a strange place to come for such a quest. And accompanied by a coterie of charming young ladies."

"Hello," I said in greeting. "Are you also searching for the Truth?"

"Only inasmuch as it is my habitual pursuit. I have come with these splendid fellows whom I met at a Party to which I was invited. My curiosity was sparked, as indeed was theirs, but we have seen no evidence of the Truth. Not that I really expected to. The Truth is not to be found in such idle tourism. But amongst the

frivolity of play can sometimes be found great wisdom. A lighted candle may be found in the darkest shadows. We may not have found the Truth, but I have been much impressed by the folly pursued in your country. It has resulted not in enlightenment but great misery and anarchy.”

He growled slightly. “However, all is not well with me. I have lost my slave. In all this anarchy and distraction, he has absconded and left me. The last I saw of him was his back as he ran down the dark depths of one of your streets. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

“No,” I confessed. “I haven’t seen him anywhere.”

“And your friends? They haven’t seen a runaway slave have they?”

Anna shook her head. “There have been so many people running about I wouldn’t know whether they were slaves or whatever.”

“No matter,” the dog snorted. “I believe the supplier’s warranty may still be valid. But what of you, young man? It is several days now since I met you at the home of my good friend, Tudor.”

“Tudor!” exclaimed Beta. “Is it the same Tudor I know?”

I nodded my head. “It is. This gentleman was a guest at Tudor’s castle when I was there.”

“Do you know Tudor?” asked the Philosopher. “Truly, he has some very sundry friends.”

“How is he? How has the General Election affected him? Do you know?”

The Philosopher growled slightly. “Alas, the results have not accorded at all well with his wishes. I haven’t seen him since we met a few days ago, but I have heard about him from people I have met at the Party. There has been a revolt against him by

his staff and he has lost a great deal of money in some investments he had made. There's some connection in his business affairs with those of the late Lord Arthur. When the mighty fall from the heights of a tall tree, they break the branches supporting them."

"Revolt?" wondered Beta.

"Yes," the Philosopher said. "It's something to do with the employment legislation that your Red Government intends to institute. It apparently does away with the discrepancies between the different districts. Employees now have considerably more rights than they had before. Tudor wasn't very happy about it, but his staff have come out in some sort of industrial action. He's now alone in his castle with no servants to care for him and his material wealth vanishing as more and more businesses collapse in the wake of Lord Arthur's demise. It seems his affairs were more complex than anyone had imagined! That in itself would have precipitated a crisis on the financial markets, but the additional chaos here in the Suburbs has caused a startling lack of confidence in the stock markets. I'm just happy that I never invested in any of your country's businesses, otherwise I might also be contemplating suicide now. Never build on a quicksand. It might well be the end of our good friend's wealth and security: the only glimmer of hope on his horizon being the good news regarding the Cat Kingdom..."

"Why hello again!" interrupted Zitha, who had spotted us and jumped off the bonnet of the range rover to chat. She was wearing a wax jacket and green wellington boots. Her hair was stuffed inside a chequered cloth cap. "Still looking for the Truth? How jolly! That's what we're here for. You haven't seen it, have you?"

"No," I admitted. "But then, we haven't really been looking very hard. We've

been more worried about avoiding trouble.”

“Don’t blame you! Don’t blame you! And there’s a lot of jolly trouble here. We’ve seen some absolutely dreadful things. If it weren’t for our bodyguards I don’t know where we’d be!” She indicated the two gorillas. “Some frightful monsters tried to attack us! Very badly bred! But our bodyguards shot at them - killed one or two I think - and they scattered very sharply. No monster can withstand a cartridge of hot lead. But since we’ve been here, we’ve not seen this flipping Truth at all! And some of our company’s got lost. We don’t know where they’ve got to! One of them was Sir George. You’ve not seen him have you?”

“Sir George? The giant grasshopper?” asked Anna.

“The same. Friend of yours, is he? I don’t know where he is! He got jolly upset when the Red Party won the General Election. He just wouldn’t stir for hours. He just sat in the opium room, moaning about how much it would affect his shares. Not that it’s helped my father’s investments any, either. And now we don’t know where he is. He came with us to the Suburbs for the diversion. I don’t think he was bothered about finding the Truth. I take it you’ve not seen him yourselves?”

We shook our heads. Zitha regarded my companions.

“Well, you *do* have some absolutely wonderful friends, I must say! Are you from the City?”

Xenana nodded her head. “I wish I was there now.”

“And don’t we all! Coming to the Suburbs has been a ghastly mistake! It’s vile here! No jolly fun at all! I don’t think we’ve got enough ’poo to keep us going for much longer.” She looked at Xenana and Anna approvingly. “Hey. Do you want to stick around? We’ll be setting off soon. You can come with us if you like.”

“That sounds an excellent idea!” said Anna. “I don’t mind if we do! What do you say? Shall we stay here?”

Xenana nodded eagerly. “You don’t have anything stronger than champagne, do you? And has *anyone* got any ciggies? I’m just *dying* for a puff! I don’t think I’ve ever needed a smoke more in my life!”

“Course we have, my dear! We’ve got *everything*! And if we’ve not got it here, then we’ll have it back at the Party!”

Beta and I left Anna and Xenana with the relative security of Zitha and her friends by the range rover, and pursued our quest along the dark forbidding Suburban streets. The sun had fully set, but none of the lamp-posts had come on. Neither were there any lights coming from the houses on either side of the road, although a menacing orange aura emanated from far off. The devastation and chaos meted out in this district surpassed all that we had seen before. Hedges were pulled down, windows and doors were ripped out of the semi-detached houses, cars had been upturned and a trail of water-logged garbage was blown along the streets by the persistently strong gusts of wind.

I shivered in the evening chill, and grasped Beta’s hand as much for my own comfort as for hers. There were no people wandering about the streets now: it was eerily and uneasily quiet and empty. Occasionally, we passed dark mounds slumped out on the ground which could have been garbage, but could just have easily been people’s bodies. We were disinclined to find out for sure, principally from overwhelming helplessness. What could we do if they were corpses?

When we heard the sound of clicking mandibles and raised voices, we dashed behind the shadow of a garden wall, in amidst a pile of torn and sodden magazines,

with such titles as *My Knitting Weekly*, *New Car Review* and **The Suburbs Advertiser and Courier**. We saw a group of ants and termites, each about two foot long, like those I had seen in Endon. In amongst them was a couple of giant earwigs and buzzing menacingly overhead were a few flies, each as large as myself. They were shouting and bawling at each other, more in a state of drunkenness than organised malice, and those words we caught were more to do with just how drunk they were and how annoyed they were that no pubs were open. The procession took a tortuously long time to pass by, and we were terrified that one of the flies that buzzed backwards and forwards would examine the shadows behind the garden walls and distressed hedges with more attention. A bottle shattered against the windscreen of a car, one ant paused opposite to vomit loudly into the gutter and an empty beer can was thrown over our heads to bounce off the double-glazing of an upstairs window.

Eventually, the sounds receded enough for Beta and I to re-emerge, which we did with caution, and walked on, keeping to the shadows in case there should be more stragglers. Our caution was justified as we came to the smashed windows and discarded wares of a small row of shops. There was a chaotic mess of broken television sets; scattered, damp and now inedible chocolate bars; neon tubes torn loose from the windows; cans of beans and plastic bottles of washing-up liquid; and torn open cardboard boxes. In amongst all this were two or three ants sitting on the ruins of a freezer drinking from the bottles of cider and wine they had taken from the smashed wreck of an off-license. From their boisterous, incoherent ramblings it was obvious that they were far too drunk to concern themselves with us, but, nonetheless, we crept by stealthily.

We hadn't walked very far from these shops until we came to the grounds of a

small chapel, where extraordinary damage had been wrought on the small tombstones in the cemetery and the weather-cock, shaped like a pig with large wings, was dangling down the cracked steeple. Whoever had expended their wrath on the building had clearly relished doing so. I spotted a strange cylindrical object lying on one side in one of the deeper puddles left by the downpour. It was a green top hat now much darker where the water had soaked itself into the fabric.

“I think I know who that belongs to,” I remarked to Beta.

“You do?” asked Beta. “Who could that be?”

“Someone I met a few days ago. Someone that Zitha said was lost in the Suburbs somewhere. Perhaps he’s around here.”

“Who’s around here?”

“Sir George. A giant grasshopper.”

“Oh! Another monster!” exclaimed Beta. “Everything you could ever imagine is loose in the Suburbs. Giant flies! Hideous termites! Did you see those horrid mouths of theirs? Just like shears. And now a giant grasshopper!”

“He’s a very wealthy businessman. Perhaps we’ll see him here. I hope he’s alright!”

I wandered off the road, through a great gash torn into the hedge enclosing the church, and searched about the toppled and defaced tombstones. Many had graffiti sprayed over them: some of a political nature, but just as many of a vulgar or obscene character. There had certainly been an exhaustive outbreak of desecration.

My hope, or more accurately fear, of finding Sir George proved to be true. He was lying in the shadow of a tomb, above which was the statue of an angel’s torso, her wings and head lying in fragments all about the ground, and graffiti reading, amongst

other things, BEES SUCK! and RED PARTY BOOT BOYZ RULE, OK! His head was resting on the angel's marble arm, his antennae twitching near the remnants of the marble cloth clutched in chipped white fingers. His body sprawled out in a chaos of spindly limbs, clothes torn and soaked in blood, his thorax split open, blood spreading out from under his long waistcoat and a rear limb bent in a very curious and disturbing angle. His face was battered and bloody, blood intermixing with the lenses of his eyes and several antennae broken or even severed. He was, however, still alive and moaning piteously and defiantly.

I bent over him, leaning my knee against the base of the tomb and gazed into his ruined face. "Sir George! Are you alright?"

The grasshopper groaned and turned his multifaceted eyes towards me. "Uurrghh! Wass ... look like? ... The Damned ants! Ants! They ... did it! ... Aaagh! ... They attacked me! ..."

Beta knelt down beside me. She examined the blood seeping through the fabric of his coat, and drew in a deep appalled breath. "You're losing a lot of blood! We've got to get you to a hospital!"

"There aren't many ambulances about," I pointed out. "And the phones don't work. And I don't know any hospitals around here."

"There must be ... ughh! ... There must be ... some help. I can't be left like ... argh! ... like this. Not Sir George Greenback! Not me! There ... argh! ... must be an ambulance. What'd I pay my ... ugh! ... premiums for? People like me don't ... uh! ... they don't ... Those Damned ... Damned ants! And termites!"

"Why did they do it?" Beta asked. "Why did they attack you?"

"For nothing!" groaned the grasshopper angrily, releasing a stream of invective

despite his obvious agony. “The damned lower orders! ... Aagh! ... It’s the Damned Red ... The General Election has ... They’ve been emboldened ... Aagh! ... They attacked me. For nothing! For nothing!”

“For nothing at all?” I wondered.

“I told them to ... urgh! ... I told them ... ‘Get out of my way!’ I said ... urgh! ... Blocking my way, they were! Lower orders have got to know ... aargh! ... got to know ... their place. Insects like me are not supposed to ... shouldn’t need to ... aargh! ... ugh! ... The Damned insolence! And they attacked me ... ugghh! ... There were too many of them! I killed one of them! ... argh! ... Maybe more than one! ... They didn’t stop! ... Too many of them! Too ... argh! ... Too many!”

“Perhaps they were the insects we saw earlier,” Beta commented. “They were awfully drunk and disorderly!”

“It’s the ... ergh! ... It’s the fault of the Damned Reds! They should never have been allowed ... uggh! ... Never allowed to win the Election! See what’s happened! ... Aagh! ... It’s the rule of the mob! ... Anarchy! I hate them! ... Argh! ... I ... I ...”

The grasshopper agitatedly twitched his antennae, and tried to stir one of his legs. The effort cost him a great deal of extra pain. He shouted out loudly, the sound deadened against the damp night air but still prominent in the uneasy silence. He looked at us mournfully.

“I’m not ... aagh! ... I’m not dying, am I? ... uggh! ... Those Damned ... ergh! ... Damned ants haven’t ...? ... Not Sir George Green ... Not me! It can’t be happening! ... It doesn’t happen to ... I’ve paid my ... agh! ... There must be some help ... aagh! Oh! Aaaghh! God In Heaven! ... ‘Swounds! ... aarghh! ... The pain ... The pain ... Aghh! ... Some relief ... I can’t! ... The Reds! ... Aaagghh! ... Those ants ... and termites ... and

...”

“We *must* get some help!” said Beta urgently. “We can’t just let him ... die. We’ve *got* to do *something*!”

It was then that we heard the sounds of some people wandering through the cemetery. They were not making any threatening noises and from what we could see of them they appeared to be no cause for apprehension. They were dressed in heavy black hooded gowns, looking far more like monks than monsters. They were examining the damage caused to the church with apparent disgust, and two of them were kneeling in front of a marble cross above a tomb that had escaped the worst of the vandalism. One was crossing himself with veneration at the spectacle of torn up gravestones and shattered marble. We couldn’t see their faces or hands in the dark of the cloudy night, but after the traumatic sights we had seen so far that evening, they were a welcome if sobering sight.

“Perhaps they can help,” I whispered to Beta.

She nodded. “I’m sure they can extend the hand of Christian mercy and charity to Sir George. I’ll look after him while you talk to them.”

“Yes, you do that. I’m sure I won’t be long. I’m sure they will want to help in some way. They look so pious.”

I walked towards the hooded figure who had been crossing himself and stood in front of him, palms facing out to indicate that I offered no threat. He turned to face me, and, even as close as I was now, I could not see his face. I noticed for the first time that he and his companions all had submachine guns slung over their shoulders, but decided that they were probably not meant aggressively. After all there were some dangerous monsters and fanatics in the Suburbs, and it was just as well to be prepared.

I told him that a friend of mine had been badly wounded and was in urgent need of medical attention. I said that if he didn't receive any attention soon he would probably die. The gowned figure said nothing at first, while his companions gathered around him, their faces hidden by their hoods, and stared at me with what I imagined must have been suspicion. His first comment rather surprised me. He told me that he was frankly rather appalled to see me dressed so immodestly in consecrated ground, showing such little respect for Christian souls.

I repeated my own news, adding that I hoped he and his friends could extend their Christian charity and help my friend in his time of need. The figures said nothing, and I was feeling rather embarrassed and uncomfortable. At last, the first figure expressed his wish to see my friend so that he and his companions could assess whether he was worthy of salvation, and that, if he were, there would then be no trouble, no inconvenience, too great in the saving of a Christian soul.

Reflecting on Sir George's assertions of his Christian beliefs, I felt sure that they would have nothing to worry on that account, and led them through the dark shadows of the tombstones to where Sir George was lying with Beta by his side.

Sir George faced me. "Are they ... ugghh! ... Will they? ... Aaghh! ... It hurts so ... so ... I don't know if ..."

"Are they going to help?" asked Beta, looking at me with anxiety. I nodded. She looked at the gowned figures and told them that she was glad to see them and she was sure that Sir George would show his gratitude too when he was able to do so.

The first gowned figure did not respond with quite the same civility. He told her that she was a slut, a whore and a jezebel, who was thrice damned for her immodesty in a place of the Lord, but as a human, and therefore of the chosen species,

was not to be harmed as long as she left consecrated ground, dressed herself modestly and asked forgiveness, although her palpable sin had already damned her to an eternity of torture.

Beta was rather surprised by this response. What about Sir George? she asked. Were they not going to assist him? The gowned figure simply repeated that she should leave soon, for it was all that they could do to resist temptation and lust while she affronted their vision. Beta frowned, but politely did as she was told. She ran over to me and held my hand, positioning herself such that she was out of their sight.

“... Are you going to ... aaghh! ... Are you ...?” asked Sir George pitifully.

The figure told Sir George that he was damned and damned a million times. Not only was he a soulless animal - themselves tolerated by God only insofar as they could be seen to serve man, the only creature God had blessed with a soul and the hope of redemption - but he was also an insect, a vain foppish insect of proportions contradictory to those decreed by the Creator and manners which aped those of the worst excesses of humankind. He was therefore damned and deserving only of death.

Beta squeezed my hand when she heard this judgment, and Sir George looked askance at the gowned figures surrounding him, their submachine guns in their hands and no faces visible under the darkness of the hoods.

“Are you? ... Ugghh! ... Can you? ... Please ...”

There was suddenly a furious burst of submachine gun fire that tore into Sir George's prone form, blasting his ruined thorax and abdomen apart, ripped his clothes to shreds and transported fragments of his internal organs to the sides of the tomb. This was followed by silence during which the hooded figures crossed themselves.

“You killed him! You killed him!” shouted Beta. “Why did you do that? Why

did you kill him?"

The hooded figures all knelt down to pray with the exception of the first figure who turned to address us. He explained that he and his companions had merely exercised their Christian duty, a calling which the damnable blasphemy of the quest for the Truth had brought them to the Suburbs to execute. We had only been spared because we were human. Had we been another species, especially a pig or centaur, we would have joined our late friend in his preordained transportation to Hell. However, he added, were we to continue to sully the consecrated grounds of God's house with our naked flesh then they might feel obliged to execute the exact word of their creed.

"We had better get going!" I said to Beta, who was staring at the bloody mess which had once been Sir George. She stared at me with wide disbelieving eyes, but nodded.

"I think we should!" she agreed, turning round, still holding my hand and leading me out of the cemetery, over the shattered remnants of the low wall enclosing it and back into the dark forbidding, but still less frightening, streets of the Suburbs. The dark hooded figures were all bent down in prayer as we left, soon becoming invisible in the shadows cast by the ruined church.

Beta was very still very distressed by Sir George's murder, but she held on to my hand tightly and said nothing. The Suburbs were dark and deserted, the orange glow in the distance being the only sign of life. Many of the houses were in a very poor state, their roofs caved in and the brickwork surrounding their windows blackened by the results of fierce fires. The only sounds we could hear were the blustering wind, and fluttering paper pressing against ruined hedges and walls. This silence was momentarily shattered by several large military helicopters thundering overhead, beams of light

scanning the Suburban streets below.

“Let’s hope they bring some order to the Suburbs,” I commented to Beta. “Perhaps they can flush out all the monsters and rioters who’ve caused all this!”

Beta glanced up at me, but made no comment. The helicopters disappeared out of sight, and the Suburbs returned to its earlier quiet. We walked along what had once been the main road, but the larger detached homes aligning it had not escaped from vandalism any more than the occasional shops, telephone boxes and bus shelters. In one place, a telegraph had been uprooted and bestraddled the deeply dented bonnet of a large car and reached half way across the road. We trod over this, and saw another figure in the darkness ahead of us, and one which somehow emitted a golden aura from his very presence.

It was the Unicorn, who was walking steadily and unhurriedly along the centre of the road with no apparent fear at all. He saw us approach, and greeted us with a whinny and a gesture of his long tasselled tail. “Why, hello young man,” he said when he was level with us, “and you, too, young lady. I see your pursuit of the Truth has brought you here. I take it that you haven’t found it yet?”

“We haven’t really been looking for it,” Beta confessed. “There’ve been so many other things to worry ourselves with.”

The Unicorn nodded his head. “Indeed there have been. What bedlam! But don’t give up your quest. You must not be dissuaded this from the object of your wanderings. You are surely more likely to find the Truth than these others who have congregated here motivated by nothing more than curiosity or malice.”

“I didn’t believe that so much injury could be done in the pursuit of something as good and honourable as the Truth!” Beta exclaimed.

“Isn’t that always the way! Throughout history, the worst violence is always wrought in the name of what is best and most universally desirable. I have seen it happen so many times before and in so many places. If it is any consolation to you, this night will soon be forgotten as have so many similar nights.”

“Are you saying that you’ve seen destruction and chaos like this before?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. It happens periodically. The stresses and strains of all societies soon give way to disorder. I’ve seen worse. Much worse. Hundreds of thousands slaughtered by machete. People hunted down by helicopter gunships. Missiles and rockets pounding from distances, sometimes as far as a continent away. Mothers killing their own daughters. Sons killing their fathers. Decapitated heads on skewers, rivers of blood, corpses flowing down rivers, all that and more. I’m not saying that some, if not all, of these things are not happening tonight somewhere in this land, but, generally, these moments of destruction are mercifully brief.”

“Are you saying we should accept this as just something which happens?” Beta asked, clearly upset by such detachment.

“My view of events is necessarily on a much longer scale than yours, and I have learnt to see them as part of the cycles of change and evolution. Every wave comes to a crest and collapses in on itself. Only great care and attention can prevent such a crisis from taking on the murderous proportions we have here. But my hope is that as the strands of society become so much enmeshed with each other they will prevent the worst from happening...”

“And what is the worst?” I wondered.

“Oh! The total destruction of everything. But enough of these musings. I’m

pleased to see that you are both still alive and in such apparently good mettle. So much has changed has it not, young man, since I met you nearly a week ago in Gotesdene?"

"Yes, it has! And how is Gotesdene? Has *it* escaped from this tumult?"

"Alas, no! There are few places untouched, but fortunately none in this country as severely affected as the Suburbs. It was a touch of genius of that absurd marsupial to direct the worst of the crisis into an area utterly incapable of coping with it. There has been a revolt by the peasants of Gotesdene against the Lord Mayor which has left many dead and not a few corpses dangling from nooses in trees. The White Elephant has fled, his business concerns ravaged as a result of his unwise investments, many of which have been in the failed affairs of the late Lord Arthur. His castle has been sacked and his retainers raped, tortured and slaughtered. I imagine, however, that the Lord Mayor will recover from all this rather better than many of those who have perpetrated this violence. I doubt that he wasn't well-insured. But the number of dead is significantly less than that here in the Suburbs."

"Have you seen much of what has been happening?" I wondered.

"Enough. Quite enough to know! Whole avenues and cul-de-sacs are in flames. You can see the aura of the fires which have been started all over the Suburbs." He nodded at the orange glow that had so recently appeared relatively comforting. "People have been hacked to death, gunned down, raped, disembowelled, impaled. Many, themselves, perpetrators of the violence. Blacks slaughtered by Illicitists. Religious sects destroyed by opposing sects. One species or race set against another. Others have been methodically slaughtered merely for what they are. I saw some goats from near Gotesdene being rounded up by some pigs with guns, to be mowed down by firing squads against the walls of a supermarket warehouse. I saw centaurs lying dead

on the ground: their upper torsos methodically sliced off from the lower equine parts: presumably by those who disapprove of such miscellaneous beings. Duckbill platypuses, chimæras and, of course, beings such as myself are considered worthy of slaughter simply because we don't conform to some fairly rigid convictions as to what an animal should be!"

"What do you think the result of all this will be?" Beta asked.

"Who knows? Who can say? Crises like this usually benefit those who have been most aggressive, which I suppose, in this case, would suggest the Illicit Party. All that can be said is that the recovery will not be easy. There will be more death and destruction long after the last fires of the Suburbs are extinguished as the many disparate elements of your country do battle against each other for their own perceived interests. City against Country. Pig against goat. Black against Red. Dog against Cat. Peasant against landlord. There is a great deal of pent-up frustration and hatred still to be released, and much of which will be fatally exacerbated tonight."

"And all this for the Truth!" I exclaimed sorrowfully.

The Unicorn shook his head. "Not for the Truth at all! The Truth has nothing to do with all this! The quest for the Truth may, for all I know, originally have been pursued for good and laudable reason, but it has become nothing more than an excuse. Don't confuse the apparent and real cause of an event! The Truth is no less the Truth now than it was yesterday. I doubt very much that the Truth is in any way a green light for this kind of destruction, but I suspect that very many more atrocities will continue to be met in its name. The bastardisation of the Truth is no different to that which has happened to other causes throughout history when fanaticism meets prejudice and political ambition meets warfare. Socialism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism,

Democracy, Justice and Fairness have all been used as rallying cries for the most gross abuses and the most atrocious violence that I have witnessed. It is rare indeed that a creed of destruction is phrased without hypocrisy.”

The Unicorn looked up at the dark brooding sky, as a particularly dark cloud passed overhead. A brief flash of lightening appeared in the distance followed by a low rumble of thunder. He pawed the pavement with a cloven hoof and whinnied. “More rain, I suspect. That should hopefully dampen the fervour of some of those here tonight, though I doubt that it will alleviate the misery of the tens of thousands of refugees from the Suburbs, or those who have been made homeless.”

He looked at us again, and tapped Beta gently on the arm with his horn. “I must leave you now. I have duties to perform elsewhere, as a Unicorn must. I wish you both the very best. I’m sure you will be at least partially successful in your quest.”

With that, he shook his mane and strode off with the same nonchalant tread with which he’d approached, leaving the street somehow much emptier and quieter than it was before. Beta grasped my arm, as another flash of lightening from many leagues away illuminated the sky and the resulting rumble of thunder became more distinct. A gust of wind blew by, lifting Beta’s hair high above her head and across her face. She brushed it to one side, and determinedly strode ahead, pulling me along with her.

The calm was again shattered by low and ominous thunder, but this time more prolonged and progressively louder. Beta and I dashed off the centre of the road, behind the shattered ruins of the parked cars on the pavement in the dark shadows of hedges and a badly chipped red post box. The sound became a roar, as a cavalcade of armoured cars thundered along the street as fast as any private car. The whole

procession took only a few minutes to pass by, but it seemed endless, machine guns on the outside pointed ahead and the occasional dark figure of a soldier sitting on top. Behind came a lower roar of jeeps in which sat groups of soldiers claspings their weapons and staring at the road receding behind them.

They were soon gone. Calm once again descended on the Suburban ruins. Another crash of thunder echoed in the sky, and a pornographic magazine was picked up by the wind and blew against Beta's bare leg. She disdainfully kicked it to one side, and guided me back into the street.

"We mustn't give up!" Beta hissed. "The Unicorn must be right. Our quest must be worth pursuing!"

My heart wasn't really in it anymore, but I nodded. Where else was I to go? I was in my home town and there was no obvious way out of it. We might as well go forward. I squeezed Beta's arm. She looked at me with large limpid eyes.

"Are you alright?" she asked, observing my expression.

I nodded. "I was just thinking..."

"Thinking?"

I nodded again. "Thinking about how lucky I've been to meet you. Thinking how very much I've enjoyed being with you these last few days. Thinking that however much we've been through together, and whether we find the Truth or not, and whatever we might go through soon, and whether we even survive, what has been most worthwhile is that ..."

I paused. The habits of Suburban reserve were overcoming me, even amongst the Suburbs' death throes. Beta grasped both my hands in her own, and faced me eye to eye. I pressed on.

“I think that meeting you. And being with you. Has been the most important. The most worthwhile. The most significant thing of my quest!”

There. I’d said it! A great weight took flight and despite the horrors of the world around me a strange levity and elation took hold of me. Beta responded as somehow I knew she would. She pressed her face against mine, her arms gripped the back of my neck, while my arms grasped her around her naked waist, and her tongue and mine battled together in the middle of the dark empty street. Beta’s hair brushed against my face and hands, her skin was cool in the evening chill and there was a sudden flash of lightening much closer by. As the air vibrated with the ominous echoes of thunder, my thoughts concentrated on the liquid warmth of Beta’s mouth and the contours of her beautiful naked body.

We continued along the dark and ominously quiet Suburban streets. The rumbles of thunder continued spasmodically above our heads, and the streets occasionally lit up in a flash of lightening. Sometimes the lightening forked across the sky like a crack in the dark firmament. The streets were ruinous and disconcerting. We passed one street in which dark bundles lay about on the pavement, over car bonnets and across the road. We were about to wander down this road, but without a word, Beta gripped my arm and pulled me backwards.

“Wh...?” I asked.

Beta closed her eyes and pulled me more urgently. I glanced back to see the cause of her concern, thinking perhaps to see more monsters in the street, but there was nothing. It then became belatedly clear that these bundles were in fact the corpses of men, women and children who had been massacred. Another flash of lightening revealed a distinct red tinge in the puddles and water gathered in the gutters, unable to

escape down blocked drains.

My horror was deepened when I recognised where we were. Even though the houses were mostly just burnt-out wrecks of recent fires, and most landmarks had been wantonly destroyed, it was still recognisable as the part of the Suburbs where I came from. The names of the streets were the same: Apidistra Avenue, Rose Garden Road and Camomile Crescent. This was home, and my house wasn't too far from here. There were the smashed windows of my local newsagent and post office. There was the dangling telephone receiver and leads lying about on the ground near the smashed glass of the local red telephone box. There was the smashed glass of belisha beacons by the local zebra crossing where a small car was embedded in the side of a larger car, and its boot sliced off by the passage of, perhaps, military vehicles.

"I live round here!" I exclaimed to Beta. "This is where I've lived all my life! My house isn't at all far. Look at all the destruction!"

Beta squeezed my hand with sympathy. "Shall we see how your house is?"

"I'm not sure I can bear to see it! It'll probably be a ruin like all these others."

I indicated the houses with collapsed roofs, broken windows, charred brickwork and dismantled hedges.

A crack of lightening launched itself onto the ground at the end of a nearby cul-de-sac releasing the smell of burning wood and followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder that echoed loudly across the roofs of semi-detached houses. It lit up a street scene of discarded rubbish, broken television aerials, shattered cars and what appeared to be another body lying on the drive of the house we were standing outside. At about the same time, a huge droplet of water splattered my face and stung as it trailed down my cheek.

“I don’t think we’ll have much choice. It looks like it’ll start raining again. We’ll need to find some shelter!”

I nodded. “It’s only a couple of streets away. Perhaps it’ll be alright!” I breathed in deeply. I feared the worst, but could see no choice as more raindrops fell on us, accompanied by flashes of lightening and rumbles of thunder.

“Let’s run!” urged Beta. “Come on!”

“Yes, we must!” I agreed, still grasping Beta’s hand and dashing along the streets neighbouring mine. Along Orchard Drive, past Cherry Tree Close and Poplar Avenue, around the corner of Meadow Crescent, and straight into my own street - roads I remembered more for their relative location than for anything in them that I could actually recognise. As we ran, past and through puddles, dodging cars parked extremely badly in the middle of the road, the refrain of thunder and lightening urged us on our way together with the constant beating of rain not yet in full torrent.

As we ran along we heard a roar approaching us from the sky, louder than any crash of thunder, and then, speeding just yards above our heads, just skimming over the ruined roofs of the houses, was a jet plane, its lighted fuselage easily visible. It was gone as soon as it came, the roar of its engines still getting progressively louder after the jet had shot off into the distance. A more persistent roar of helicopter gunships followed behind it, visible like a swarm of dark bees against the white electric glow of the lightening-illuminated sky. Our immediate concern however was the rain which had broken into a heavier more persistent patter.

And then we were in my own road and ahead of us I could see my home. It stood out distinct from the other houses, including that which was the other half of the semi-detached block, not only from its long history of familiarity, but also by its

unusual intactness. All the other houses were charred and ruined, but mine was as I had left it. The hedge remained intact, the dustbins standing, the windows unbroken and, most surprisingly of all, amongst all the darkness of the Suburbs, was the distinct luminescent aura of light generating from an upstairs window.

“I don’t remember leaving a light on!” I gasped, as we hesitated at the gate.

“How can it be a light? There’s no electricity! You don’t have your own power generator?”

“No,” I said puzzled. “I don’t know what it can be!”

We dashed to the front door which was closed and secure, and stood under the porch as the rain finally ceased its teasing, and culminated in a heavy outburst. A wall of rain surrounded the house, obscuring visibility, and making escape impossible. I took my keys out of my pocket, and applied them to the locks securing the door. After a few moments, the door was open and we were in the darkness of the hallway. Instinctively, I clicked on the hallway light, but there was no response.

“The electricity *has* been cut off!” I exclaimed.

“So what’s the light from upstairs?” Beta asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

“We’ll have to find out.”

I agreed. There appeared to be no choice. The timpani of rain beat against the windows and the front door porch. Despite the dark, we navigated to the foot of the staircase, which wound up to the upstairs landing, and gingerly walked up. When we were half way up the carpeted stairs, and just by a vase of flowers on a table, we could see the ruin of the Suburbs through the landing window. Helicopters and jets were gathered over the Suburban roofs, and even through the cracks of thunder we could

hear the din of their engines and more ominously the crackle of rocket fire. A sequence of bright lights shot out of the jet's nose, followed by explosions and a column of flame rising from whatever it had shot. The jet arched up in a loop and disappeared off in the distance, while another jet roared in from another direction.

The landing was partially lit by two sources of light. One was the occasional flash of white light from the electric storm, and the other came through the rectangular door jamb of my bedroom which was where the mysterious source of light came from.

"What is it?" I wondered.

"It's the Truth!" Beta asserted. "I just know it. I'm certain of it!"

"The Truth! Here in my home? All along? It can't be!" However even as I stated my doubts, I felt a strange feeling of certainty. Yes. It was the Truth. What I had been searching for the last week. The Truth. It was here. In my bedroom. I don't know from where this feeling of certainty came. It was nothing in the aura of light, which resembled nothing more than the normal light of a bedroom in a dark hallway, but something that seemed to emerge from deep inside me. It was a certainty born of the Truth itself which dispelled any uncertainty or doubt.

Beta and I approached the bedroom door. I pushed it open, and we looked inside at a room transformed not in any particular detail, no part of it at all different from when I had left, but now possessed of a new quality and essence that I was sure had never been there before. And the source and immanent possessor of this quality was the Truth itself.

"It's here! We've found it! At last! Now everything will be alright again. Things will never again be bad! All the world's problems since the beginning of time and for eternity have found their solution!" I eulogised to Beta, who like me focused

her eyes intently and unblinkingly on the Truth.

There suddenly came another roar of jet plane engines, getting louder and louder by the microsecond, and then without warning a sudden jarring crash. The fabric of the house shuddered and then collapsed in on itself. The ceiling crashed down onto the floor, the television aerial and chimney plunging through the roof, through the plaster of the ceiling and, then, along with the rest of the room including ourselves into a pile of rubble on the foundations of the building.

Like a light being turned off, or a fire being extinguished, the aura of the Truth vanished in the destruction as our bodies were covered with our blood and brought down with the weight of my home's walls and plaster. As Beta and I collapsed under a pile of masonry we knew, with the same certainty we had when we'd seen the Truth, that it was now destroyed. Its fragments scattered forever, to the four winds, from the beginning to the end of time, from the greatest galaxy to the smallest boson, from alpha to omega.

Epilogue

And in the end we survived. We were found in the ruins of my house buried under the rubble, soaked in blood and rain, protected from the worst of the damage by the mattress and pillows of my bed. Beta and I were repaired, along with the Suburbs, and now live together in married bliss in the Suburban avenues where I was always destined to spend the rest of my life. Beta is now a normal Suburban housewife, indistinguishable from all the others, and I commute each day to work to provide for my home and family.

The Suburbs were restored to their former state. Houses were rebuilt, the streets were cleaned, the electricity and telephone lines were reconnected, and the television aerials replaced on the roofs. Beyond the Suburbs, the country gradually repaired itself from the chaos, but not without some political cost.

The Red Government was ousted by a coalition of the White, Blue, Black and Illicit Parties which rewrote the constitution to justify its seizure of power. This fragile stability didn't last for very long. In a succession of suspicious elections and power-broking, first the White and then the Black Parties were ousted from the coalition, their departures not being long followed by them being banned, like the Red and Green Parties before them. Within a year, the Blue Party was also ousted and became similarly illegal, and the country became a nominally independent Illiberal Socialist Republic - an independence which was not to last for very long.

The Truth remained lost. All mention of it was purged from Illiberal Socialist doctrine and no record remains that it had ever been the subject of a quest. The official history of the Illiberal Socialist Revolution does not even have a footnote dedicated to

the great pursuit, and indeed it is as if it had never happened. The quest for the Truth continues as before. Nobody would ever believe us that it has in fact already been discovered and has now been destroyed. It is now, as it had always been, a timeless and possibly insoluble enigma.